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Body, Sexuality, and Gender



Versions and Subversions
in African Literatures 1

Edited by

Flora Veit-Wild
&
Dirk Naguschewski



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INTRODUCTION

Lifting the Veil of Secrecy

THE SERIES "VERSIONS & SUBVERSIONS in African Literatures," to which "Body, Sexuality, and Gender" is the overture, aims at laying out new trails for the pursuit of African literature, to get away from outdated inscriptions and debates. It is time to undo the canonical order of literary texts to be studied and to question the supremacy that certain issues have held in theoretical discussions. Our starting point is that there is not one version of African literature; rather, there are many versions and even more subversions. There is not one way to look at this literature; there are many. Needless to say, this position challenges any notion of an authoritative, uniform truth; it opposes any hegemonic and monolithic political or theoretical discourse.

Literary representations of the body from Africa as well as narrative strategies of writing the body have lately begun to receive wider critical attention. Thus the themes of body, sexuality and gender also formed a major focus of the international conference "Versions & Subversions in African Literatures," which took place in Berlin in May 2003. The essays gathered in this volume, most of them arising from the Berlin conference, show the different angles from which issues of the body are both imaginatively depicted and critically assessed. We have tried to reflect these various angles in the structure of the present book: while the sections "Gifted Bodies" and "Queered Bodies" show new developments in viewing body and sexuality as creative powers, the sections "Tainted Bodies" and "Viol-

ated Bodies" contain essays that investigate the exposure of the body to physical aggression and other traumatic experiences.

The reflections on body, sexuality, and gender in African literary texts brought together in our volume do not consider these three terms as separate entities but instead as closely related to each other, each term questioning the other: bodies and sexualities that are transgressing concepts of gender, gender that is probing body and sexuality. Furthermore, with regard to Africa the three concepts form a particularly contested space, because body and sexuality are subjected to power relations not only in terms of gender, but also in terms of race, ethnicity, and the legacy of colonialism. By virtue of this inter-referentiality, the essays break new ground. Concepts and paradigms such as 'writing the body', the performative quality of gender and sex, or elements of queer theory are applied to African literature and challenge long-standing notions and perceptions. What is particularly at stake is the question of feminism. Since the 1970s several variants of African feminism have developed, represented by prominent voices – especially from West Africa – whose common ground has been their fight for the equal rights of women against the dominance of male views and patriarchal social structures. Yet these feminist writers and theoreticians, arguing mainly from a sociopolitical point of view, have remained wary of the 'unsafe issues' surrounding the body, and are conservative in their treatment of sexual orientation.

While the subversion of dominant discourses through a multiplicity of voices and perspectives has become an almost inflationary trope in what is generally understood as postcolonial theory, this volume tries to show that there is more than empty rhetoric in the subversive quality of "Body, Sexuality, and Gender." This subversiveness becomes particularly pertinent when looking at the South African situation – and it seems no coincidence that more than half of the contributions assembled here deal with literary texts from Southern Africa, particularly South Africa and Zimbabwe. Since the end of apartheid, South Africa has been engaged in a process of re-writing history, including literary history. The prevailing discourses of white supremacy and black protest literature have been replaced by a multiplicity of private stories and histories, individual perspectives and attitudes. There has been an unprecedented surge of experimentation with new narrative forms and styles, and a transgression into hitherto closed or 'closeted' topics.

Sex and secrecy

A major focal point in this formerly forbidden arena – a point therefore endowed with a strong subversive force – is the body. A particularly strong taboo has consistently surrounded sexuality, a terrain which in African society has been treated with the utmost secrecy. It seems a tragic irony that something as disastrous as the HIV/AIDS epidemic was the impelling force that finally began a more open discussion of sexual matters. The taboo around sex still holds when it comes to such 'eccentricities' as homosexuality. Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe reaped international opprobrium for his homophobic tirade during the International Book Fair in Harare in 1995, when he called homosexuality "unAfrican" and likened gays and lesbians to "dogs and pigs" (see the essays by Drew Shaw and Elleke Boehmer, which refer to these events). Yet his infamous words failed in their attempt to continue and reinforce the marginalization of homosexuality. In fact, black gays and lesbians in Zimbabwe – and subsequently in neighbouring countries – 'came out' in record numbers, and since then the Gay and Lesbian Organisation of Zimbabwe (GALZ) has become a noticeable force in the region. The Zimbabwe group has received particularly strong support from South African gay and lesbian groups, where a gay-rights movement spanning all races has a long-standing tradition. As is well-known, the constitution of the New South Africa is particularly progressive in regard to sexual orientation; hence the multiplicity of versions to be found in both sexual and racial-ethnic diversity. There is logic in the fact that the same symbolism of the rainbow is used for the Gay Pride flag as for the "rainbow colours" of the New Nation. As Cheryl Stobie remarks at the outset of her essay, both stand for powerful subversions of authoritarian rule and oppressive regimes.

In this vein, the director of GALZ, Keith Goddard, argued at the "Sex & Secrecy Conference" – which in took place in Johannesburg in June 2003 – that Mugabe uses homosexuality as the "external enemy." The conference was another major break-through in lifting the 'veil of secrecy' on the academic level, and demonstrated that the themes of body, sexuality, and gender are of major concern on the African continent. Many hundreds of participants gathered to exchange views on a wide array of themes, which to an astounding extent entered domains hitherto taboo. The panels included "The power of the secret: sexuality and ritual power," "Women's same sex relations: cross cultural and regional perspectives," "Hidden codes, local rules: social fissures, sexual consequences," "Sexuality, the power of the secret," and "AIDS: secrecy and stigma." Other presentations included topics such as "Confession and taboo: sex in sacred spaces," "Silence and

secrecy: the legal discourses of domestic violence,” “Father–daughter relations: violence, silence, and seduction in the practice of incest,” “Settling sexual and gender identities: across sex and gender,” “Homosexuality as a witchcraft secret: perspectives from southern Cameroon,” “Constructing Namibian queer selfhood in the era of HIV/AIDS,” “The deployment of sexuality in the building of the nation-state in Zimbabwe,” “Figures of the African female: texts, gender, bodies, sex,” and “The experiences of stress and trauma: Black lesbians in South Africa.” Since some of these topics arise from urgent social concerns – for instance the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and the scale of gender-based violence, to name only two obvious examples – they are highly controversial in political and cultural terms. In addition, an extraordinarily high number of papers concentrated on the question of homosexuality in Africa, which touches on the needs of many men and women in their confrontation of conflicts of identity, discrimination, or rejection arising out of their sexual orientation.

One incident at the conference in particular underlined the way in which the question of sexuality is inherently linked in Africa to issues of power and racism. The exhibition of photographs by a Danish photographer of gay black men from Mozambique caused a great deal of stir, and was compared by one conference participant to the humiliation of the Khoi woman Saartje Baartman, who was taken to Europe in 1810 as a freak-show curiosity. Her body was later displayed in a French museum before being repatriated to South Africa in 2002. In both cases, it was argued, the white gaze exploits the black body. Whether or not this charge holds true for the work of this Danish photographer (who took pictures of consenting men) involves the question of cultural translation of social values, a question which still needs further exploration.

Unsafe issues

Homosexuality is only one among the many themes surrounding the body and sexuality that have long been avoided in African literatures and its academic criticism; desire, rape, and stigmatization have also been shrouded in silence. But even where corporeal matters have been depicted, literary representations at times have remained all too stereotypical. The African female characters are sometimes idealized for their beauty, sometimes venerated as mothers, at other times condemned as witches or loose women. Gender roles and such topics as polygamy, bride price, arranged marriages, and abuse of women by men have been treated mainly from a sociopolitical angle and not in terms of what this has meant for women’s bodies. The male body was even more excluded from literary exploration. It is only fairly

recently that a new generation of African women writers have dared to touch on ‘unsafe issues’ regarding the woman in her femaleness and her corporeality. One of the pioneers is the prolific Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala, whose breaching of taboo subjects through the explicit treatment of sexuality and her decisively feminist stance has shocked especially the male African readership. “L’écriture dans la peau” (‘writing under the skin’)¹ seems an apt description of a stance and a style that can be found in an even more signal and exceptional form in the texts of Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe. She entitles one of her short essays “Writing Near the Bone”; this piece astutely defines this sort of bodily writing:

There is no essential truth about being a female writer. The best writing comes from the boundaries, the ungended spaces between male and female. [...] I learnt to write when I was almost six and at same time discovered the magic of my own body as a writing surface. [...] The skin over my legs would be dry, taut, even heavy. [...] Using the edges of my fingernails or pieces of dry grass broken from my grandmother’s broom I would start to write on my legs.²

In a style that in its dense imagery stays very close to bone, flesh, and skin, Vera has in her works courageously lifted the secrecy surrounding unsafe issues concerning the female body, its subjection as much to sexual passion as to rape, incest, abortion, war, and murder. As Elleke Boehmer states in this volume (quoting from Vera), the woman writer’s response to “taboo is vital and pressing.”

Gifted bodies

The essays in the first section, “Gifted Bodies,” suggest how women’s bodies are gifted in manifold ways: they are endowed with extraordinary powers; they act as an agency of creativity, of performative and transformative powers; and they are offered as gifts. Categories of gender and sex are being remodelled through the power of the female body, and this has a joyous aspect to it that has long been neglected. “It is time to think of sex as a gift and to recover, therefore, the potential of joy and happiness embedded in it,” Achille Mbembe reminded the participants in his remarks closing the Sex & Secrecy conference.

¹ Title of an interview with Calixthe Beyala by Tirthankar Chanda, in *Notre Librairie* 151 (2003): 40–46.

² Yvonne Vera, “Writing Near the Bone,” in *Women Writing Africa: The Southern Region*, ed. Margaret Daymond (New York: Feminist Press, 2003): 489–90.

Leaving 'traditional' feminism behind and placing herself in what she calls a post-womanist era, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi establishes the *juju* woman not only as a gift, but also as a template for re-reading African woman novelists. Modelling her reading of Bessie Head's *Maru* on the ambivalent, two-headed Makeda, Queen of Sheba, Ogunyemi demonstrates how women can be endowed with extraordinary powers and invade male space to (re)negotiate global power relations. *Maru* belongs to the 'old' canon of female-authored texts, but it is here subjected to a new approach.

Altogether four essays in the volume examine works by Yvonne Vera and her astoundingly innovative way of writing the body. In all of her texts, the woman's body appears as a gift, which may arouse great pleasure, passion, and power yet is at the same time in danger of being hurt, invaded, or violated. This conflicting place of the female body is particularly the case in such a contested space as the city, the setting of Vera's novel *Butterfly Burning*, which Robert Muponde scrutinizes in this volume. Playing with the homophonic double sense of routes and roots, he demonstrates how the female protagonists find new paths for their lives and create new forms of belonging in the urban space. Through these women's gifted bodies and their sexual pleasure, which gives them power over men, the city becomes not only sexualized, but also feminized.

The trope of women's bodies as a gift to each other forms the powerful fable of Calixthe Beyala's early novel *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, analyzed by Sigrid Köhler. In the intimate encounter of a black woman and a white woman in prison, the white woman gives her body, while the black woman gives her story. The constellation in this novel foreshadows many of the connotations woman-to-woman relationships will have in later women's fiction: their physical bonding encloses/embodies love, (com)passion, suffering, and death. As Köhler argues, the relationship between the two characters, who give themselves up for each other, can take on streaks of madness, as it abolishes frontiers and develops a logic of its own.

While the preceding essays – like the majority of articles in this book – all deal with texts authored by women, Monica Bungaro reconsiders African feminism by focusing on feminist fiction by men. Her analysis of recent novels by Nuruddin Farah, Abdulrazak Gurnah, André Brink, and Ben Okri reveals that men have come to see the need for changing gender relations. Breaking away from stereotypes and myths in the representation of women, these authors successfully subvert the existing master scripts of sexuality and gender relations, and, according to Bungaro, indeed bring forward a male feminist stance. This breakthrough is particularly true of the Somali writer Farah, who from early on in his work has explored male infringements on women's bodies from a woman's perspective. Interest-

ingly in the context of the other articles in this section, Bungaro shows how in Farah's novel *Gifts* it is the female protagonist's *refusal* to accept male gifts that enables her to gain individual freedom and independence from men.

Queered bodies

Queer theory has become a radical challenge to contemporary theory, as it provides a new theoretical approach to the analysis of literature and culture. While it privileges questions of sexuality and gender in their relation to power structures, it aims at the same time to subvert the dichotomies inherent in feminist or gay and lesbian studies. The transgression of these distinctions allows for subversive and liberating perspectives not only on sexuality understood as a private matter, but also on our understanding of sexuality and gender as deeply rooted in society. The critical potential of queer theory has not yet been extensively applied to African literatures, but South Africa is a useful site for entering into this discussion, given the relative freedom offered by the Constitution and the current debates around sexuality discussed at the Sex & Secrecy conference.

The dialectic between queerness and gender, race and ethnicity, is explored by Cheryl Stobie in her 'queer reading' of three contemporary novels by the South African authors Sheila Kohler, Shamin Sarif, and K. Sello Duiker. Using her own metaphor of the 'double rainbow', Stobie sees different strategies at work that are able successfully to subvert dominant binaries. According to her reading, it is particularly Sarif's *The World Unseen* that – through an innovative interplay between the vectors of gender and sexuality, race, and ethnicity – opens up a literary space in which new forms of empowerment can be tried out.

Although the male body is certainly present in African literature in a variety of representations, it has not been of primary concern for African writers, and we do not often find a critique of African masculinities. Accordingly, male sexuality, let alone male homosexuality, has as yet remained largely unexplored within literary studies. In his critical essay, Drew Shaw reconstructs the debate about homosexuality fuelled by Mugabe's hate speeches and demonstrates how a number of male Zimbabwean writers hesitantly pick up on the male body as a site of contested masculinity. But the attempts made by these writers must be read against the background of the work of Dambudzo Marechera, who had started the exploration of the male body as a site of *queering* bodily identities *avant la lettre* in the early 1980s. As the literal thorn in everyone's side, Marechera's created representations of male homosexuality that, while they remain somewhat ambiguous,

indicate a will to transgression and free-mindedness that is without equal in African literatures.

While there are at least some representations of male homosexuality in Zimbabwean literature (and elsewhere in African literary texts, even outside of South Africa), there seem to be almost none at all concerning lesbian sexuality. Only Rebeka Njau in *Ripples in the Pool* and Ama Ata Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy* have dealt openly with lesbianism in their works, but both have dismissed it as deviant behaviour, as Elleke Boehmer notes in the introductory remarks to her reading of Vera's *Butterfly Burning* and Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*. While neither novel contains any explicit description of same-sex desire or sexuality, Boehmer nevertheless sees at work subtle intimations of same-sex love that insinuate new, yet unrealized forms of self-expression.

A decisively novel and revelatory stand is taken by Unoma Azuah, who brings to public attention recent developments on the Nigerian literary scene. Going far beyond the implicit queerness Boehmer detects in the two Zimbabwean novels, Azuah describes how a group of female authors (herself among them) defied the taboo surrounding lesbian love and its representation in literary texts by publishing poetry and fiction that deals explicitly with same-sex love between women. These texts challenge not only homophobic attitudes among African men, but also those of some first-generation African feminists who, according to Azuah, also consider lesbianism as unnatural in the African context.

Compared to the other contributors in this section, Alexie Tcheuyap is much more cautious about the liberating potential of queerness. According to his analysis, the cinematic representation of nudity and homosexuality in African films falls in between the modes of eroticism and pornography. But pornography, as well as homosexuality, is viewed as a foreign influence on African culture, and Tcheuyap contends that African filmmakers are critically aware of this.

In our first two sections, the body is seen as the agent and origin of desire; it is perceived as the vantage point from which to develop new forms of sexuality. In our next sections, "Tainted Bodies" and "Violated Bodies," the body is seen not so much as a site of power and desire, but, in its vulnerability, as a target of aggression or mutilation resulting from racism, physical deformation, rape, or war.

Tainted bodies

This section has as its common focus the colour of the skin. By subverting racial/racist dichotomies, the essays show the various kinds of unstable

meanings that can be attached to skin colour, the shades of dark and light, the in-betweens, and the uncertain and ambiguous identities inscribed by these ambiguities. While the desire to alter one's identity through lactification on the part of the black person can ultimately lead to self-mutilation, taking on the black skin can signify an act of solidarity of the white person with the black. The white skin of the albino, finally, represents the anomalous body with the 'wrong' skin colour, which places it not far from the deformed or crippled body, which is also discussed in this section.

Susan Arndt tries to sensitize Western feminists in their approach to African literature. By drawing attention to the fact that among Western feminists whiteness usually remains unmarked whereas blackness is marked, she aims at sharpening the consciousness of power relations. In her analysis of what she calls "African-feminist" novels by Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, and Calixthe Beyala, Arndt reverses the usual gaze of literary criticism by concentrating on the portrayal of the white female characters. While she regards the relationship between white and black as problematic in Aidoo's and Bâ's literary projections, she discovers a possible emancipatory solidarity between the white and the black woman in Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*.

In Jessica Hemmings' article about the "Ambi-Generation" in Yvonne Vera's city novels *Without a Name* and (again) *Butterfly Burning*, we gain a lucid insight into the ambivalence and ambiguities attached to the colour of the skin. In her books, Vera depicts skin peels as representing the mental and physical traumas in a character's face. The skin-bleaching creams that women in the cities use, meant to enhance beauty and to obtain a new identity, may eventually enhance the risk of skin cancer; the tint turns into a taint, a sore that covers the whole body.

With Sarah Nuttall attention is drawn to the profound crisis of identity attached to – among other factors – the skin colour of a male author, the coloured South African poet Arthur Nortje. His "dark anatomies," as his poems have been called, render a painful poetic expression of being in the 'wrong skin' in the context of apartheid, where an entire ideology hinged on the colour of the skin. Nortje called his body narratives "bodiographies," and they come very close to a form of writing near the bone, near the flesh and the skin, as we find it in some texts by Yvonne Vera. Nortje's poetry, Nuttall argues, is traumatically tied to his body, emerges from it, and is borne down upon by a visceral history.

A very different stimulating perspective is opened up by Alioune Sow in his reading of the francophone writer William Sassine, whose novels are populated by what Sow calls "forbidden bodies" (the cripple, the albino, etc.). Here, the deformed body questions normalcy; the albino's whiteness

especially is opposite to the supremacy usually attached to a light skin colour, and it stands for that alleged supremacy's extreme vulnerability and exposure in a directly physical and a metonymic sense. In his essay, Sow shows how African writers frequently resort to representations of the physical deterioration of the human body to symbolize social change. The "forbidden body" thus integrated into the narrative lays bare previously ignored codifications and allows for multiple configurations of identity.

Violated bodies

Even deeper scars and wounds are inflicted upon women's bodies through male aggression in war and violent sexual assault. These acts of aggression often go hand in hand: rape has always been part of military aggression and conquest. By talking about "Violated Bodies," the essays brought together in the last section explore the wounds that war and rape cause to the female body and how this relates to the question of trauma. But the essays also explore the resilience of women who, through their creative writing, actively engage in building up a collective memory that gives more room to questions of gender and sexuality.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and Marion Pape have both investigated woman-authored texts on the Nigerian Civil War. Adimora-Ezeigbo takes a decidedly activist stance. For her, it is not only important that women talk to each other after having experienced trauma (in this case, violence committed during the war). More than that, she both articulates the vital need for these women to record their experiences in writing and deplores a dearth of female creativity not only in the Nigerian literary tradition, but especially in the field of war literature. In her analysis of the politics of remembrance in works by Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Leslie Ofoegbu, and Rose Njoku, she argues that while men are concerned with the politics of war, women writers concentrate on domestic affairs: how to hold the family together and secure the means of survival during wartime. Pape goes a step further, proposing that literary texts on the Nigerian Civil War by women present gender roles as exchangeable and negotiable; the military war, she argues, has allowed women to open the front of gender war.

The traumatic experience of rape stands in the centre of the last two essays. While Martina Kopf takes up Yvonne Vera's novel *Under the Tongue*, Lucy Graham takes a closer look at J.M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace*. Based on the idea that literature offers specific means to communicate and transform mechanisms of trauma as experienced by victims of violence, Kopf focuses on Vera's depiction of childhood sexual abuse. Kopf echoes Adimora-Ezeigbo's claim that literature can play an important role as medi-

ator between individual experience and collective memory. Reading *Under the Tongue* as a type of trauma narrative, she demonstrates how the novel convincingly transforms the effects of individual trauma by reproducing them as narration. J.M. Coetzee explicitly chose *not* to represent sexual violation in his novel. Graham regards this stifling of rape narrative as a central feature of the entire novel. The violated body remains hidden from the reader, who instead is called upon to imagine what has happened to the women and to reflect on the possibility of rendering into words the harm that is being done to human bodies.

As editors we have valued as a specific charm of this book its assemblage of contributors from a wide range of different origins and backgrounds. There are authors from anglophone African countries such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe along with those from the Senegal and Cameroon; South Africans find their place at the side of German, Austrian, and British authors, a diversity that provides this book with a multitude of cross-cultural perspectives. It is particularly noteworthy that the great majority of the writers represented here are emerging scholars who are still in the process of unfolding their academic profile. As such, they are willing to confront new questions and to enter new areas of debate, unhampered by conceptions that have become obsolete. The approaches they take to their endeavours are just as varied; while some use hermeneutical methods to reach their critical assessments, other present deconstructivist readings, or speak from decidedly activist standpoints. But, undoubtedly, all of them are inspired by a strongly felt commitment to their respective fields of literary enquiry, and to their engagement in advancing the critical study of African literatures.

FLORA VEIT-WILD and DIRK NAGUSCHEWSKI
Berlin, January 2005

Legend has bequeathed us Sheherazade. She enchanted and soothed the manic-depressive, murderous cuckold, Sultan Shahriar, through 1001 tedious nights. By inadvertently establishing the rudiments of a discipline in psychology with her talking cure, Sheherazade rehabilitates the position of women intellectually and morally, while immediately ensuring the security of women and their families in the sultanate.

In a post-womanist era, it is convenient theoretically that these two *juju* women, separated by time, space, and discipline, should be brought together to serve as a model for reading African women novelists. Well known in popular cultures in Africa, the two women epitomize the ingenuity of woman that earns her the name “witch” or *juju* woman. Operating in the realms of reason and imagination, Makeda is the political scientist. Sheherazade, maneuvering in the realms of fantasy and language, is the oral *littérateur*, the ultimate raconteur. Since both political women are the fertile origins of textual reproductions, bringing the realms of reason and fantasy together challenges the tendency to associate women solely with imagination. Further, both represent the *crème de la crème* of ‘oriental’ beauty, for they knew that “seduction of the master through an intense physical and intellectual exchange was considered to give him exquisite pleasure.”⁸

Each of these women and their political daughters (especially African women writers) start on their sexualized-intellectualized journeys from a restricted space and glide into global politics. As a nomadic identity emerges, the woman projects herself through the magical use of words by talking or through combining talking with writing. Through talk, Makeda and Sheherazade establish intercourse between men and women, ruler and ruled, for, as the Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi problematizes gender relationships across cultures,

What on earth [...] is the exact meaning of orgasm in a culture where attractive women are denied brain power? What words do Westerners use for orgasm if the woman's brain is missing? Intercourse is by definition a communication between two individuals; actually, in Arabic, one word for intercourse is *kiasa*, which literally means “to negotiate.” And what has to be negotiated in sexual intercourse is the harmonization of expectations and needs, which can be accomplished only when the two partners use their brains.⁹

⁸ Fatema Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988): 134–35.

⁹ Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West*, 39–40.

Thus, Makeda and Sheherazade, by intellectualizing expectations and needs, become replicated in many African women's novels in apparent response to the dire gender situation.¹⁰

The analogies of these two women with Margaret, Bessie Head's central character in *Maru*, are clear. Like Makeda, this other native alters the configurations of her community by crisscrossing borders to make alliances across ethnic, gender, cultural, and colonial lines. Like Sheherazade, Margaret uses her art to lift the cloud over Maru's health so he can continue the quiet revolution that alters the psychology and culture of patriarchy.

Post-womanist discourse: The alter/native

With African patriarchy in prolonged crisis, the office of the astute woman, the other native, becomes proactive. From intimate contact, the woman with second sight knows man's vulnerability. Operating with two minds – the in-between state of overt support of and covert opposition to patriarchy – she goes to ‘The Man’ (for example, babalawo, king, sultan, or president) for a tête-à-tête, a consultation. May I remind you that a tête-à-tête is literally an exchange between two heads or two minds generating cross-fertilization? In consulting the babalawo, the woman obtains good or bad *juju*.¹¹

In its universality, I see *juju* as a turn of mind that scorns extreme rationalism, realism, and other surface phenomena that ignore aspects of life shrouded in mystery. In cultures under siege, the *juju* imaginary attempts to control the alienating and the inexplicable supernaturally. A possible outcome in putting heads together (particularly by a man and a woman) is the two-headed mystery that feeds off this imaginary. From this mystical fusion, a catalytic transformation of a dire situation may be possible.

We need such catalysts in a post-womanist era, for cross-fertilizing dialogue to replace the self-absorbed conversations among women that were inevitable at the height of the gender wars. Going in to the man instead of the man going into woman is proactive. Woman invades the male space to obtain the secret that can effect change and bring about stability. Flattered into

¹⁰ See, for example, the collaboration between the psychiatrist and the prisoner in Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (London: Zed, 1983) that enabled them to produce a text. Assia Djebar's Isma and Hajila in *A Sister to Scheherazade*, the Soul and Ateba in Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, tr. Modupé Bodé-Thomas (*Une si longue lettre*, 1980; London: Heinemann, 1981) are also noteworthy.

¹¹ If you are interested in finding more about this, please call 1-800-Babalawo in New York, or set up www.babalawo.com/gone. Beware of scams.

exhibiting his power, the man succumbs, as his receptive ear welcomes the seeds of her thought. The result of that contact, sometimes manifest psychically, becomes the invigorating force of *juju* power. Considering our imperfect world, these are smart, pragmatic, earthy, survivalist moves. Their *bricoleur*-like approach makes use of the few opportunities open to the two-headed woman. Africa seems to be waiting for another woman with such power – Ama Ata Aidoo's woman who would be king¹² or Yvonne Vera's Nehanda – to again enchant and transform the continent. How long shall we wait, or, "God forbid bad thing," as we say in Nigerian Pidgin English, is this another wait for Godot?

In contemporary Africa, down but not necessarily out, many waiting women serve as handmaids to the world. Gaunt, not from Western-style anorexia but from suffering and inadequate food supply, water, and health care services, many women appear as forlorn, half-naked, ragged beggars, with misery etched in their eyes. Such are the stark images continually flashed by Western television. They serve, not to raise compassion, but to boost the idea of Western superiority, which, curiously, seems to need reiterating, in spite of centuries of political and economic subjugation of Africa.

The animals on which the camera also fondly focuses are in better health than these people are. Since wildlife represents Africa, in the Western mind, and because they are central to safaris, the speed with which the camera moves from human to animal is suspect. Is this a death-wish for the people that clutter the landscape? By their very existence, such malnourished women and their children are a mute comment on the much-touted democratic model of governance that ignores global economic inequities. Not surprisingly, the West feels no qualms when, as part of their frivolous aid, they test their contraceptives on African women's bodies decades before they are approved for use by American and European women. Contraceptive injections and the morning-after pill are cases in point.¹³ In these circumstances, Margaret Atwood's virtual reality and implied utopian vision in her science fiction *The Handmaid's Tale*,¹⁴ articulating the horrors of surrogacy, is laughable to an

¹² See Aidoo's short story, "She-Who-Would-Be-King," in *The Girl Who Can & Other Stories* (Legon, Accra: Sub-Saharan Publishers, 1997): 1–9.

¹³ In 1974, a relative of mine was receiving contraceptive injections like Depo-Provera in the women's hall of residence, Queen Elizabeth Hall, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, free morning-after pills to dispense to students who had been careless the night before. The US Food and Drug Administration did not approve these controversial drugs for American women until 1998.

¹⁴ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Garden City NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1998).

African reader. Such a pained, middle-class reader located in the West, like me, knows the playful contradiction inherent in science bedding with fiction. She also knows that her downtrodden sisters – the other natives, unspoken for by those in power at home – are not playing at work or working out in the gym.

When one sees the images of women and children in dire situations from Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan, or Iraq, one condemns the horrors of war. Comparing such images with the unspeakably obscene ones of women and children from Somalia, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, or Darfur, too weak to swat at infesting flies, the horrendous nature of the African situation unfolds. Concerned elite African women like Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El Saadawi, Lauretta Ngcobo, and Sindiwe Magona, who find it difficult to address such issues politically, use poverty-stricken women as their constituency in writing their novels. Unfortunately, these targeted illiterates cannot read them in the foreign languages or unfamiliar dialects in which they appear. Perhaps they do not need to read them: they are fiction in motion. The cannibalistic narrators, photographers, and scholars like me who study them, making a living off their dying bodies, are located elsewhere in Western havens. Since too many women continue to live these stories, have we also failed them as the politicians have with their empty theorizing?

The women writers raid the male-dominated Christian, Islamic, and African traditional institutions for ways to tackle the problem. By infiltrating male ranks, they attempt to access power and the wherewithal for women to obtain a normal existence through fusing disparate traditions in their novels. They have yet to shake the African continent like their legendary predecessors.¹⁵ Now that some have made the list of "100 Best Books of the 20th Century," one hopes Africans will feel their impact through inclusion in the curriculum. Although *Maru* did not make the list, it is worthy of study.

¹⁵ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa* (London: Longman, 1970); Mariama Bâ, *So Long a Letter*; Ken Bugul, *Riwan ou Le chemin de sable* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1999); Tsitsi Danga-rembga, *Nervous Conditions*; Assia Djebar, *Fantasia*, tr. Dorothy S. Blair (*L'amour, la fantasia*, 1985; London: Quartet, 1989); Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (New York: George Braziller, 1979); Aminata Sow Fall, *The Beggars' Strike*; Nadine Gordimer, *Burger's Daughter* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979); Bessie Head, *A Question of Power* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1973); Sindiwe Magona, *Living, Loving and Lying Awake at Night* (Claremont, S.A.: David Philip, 1991); Nawal El Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*; Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab, 1998). However, they remind us painfully of those women writers who did not.

Bessie Head's *Maru*

For those unfamiliar with the novel, the eponym is a male chief who revolutionizes his kingdom, thus casting a cloud over his rule. Maru is also the Setswana word for cloud; appropriately, the novel opens with "black storm clouds."¹⁶ *Maru* centers on Margaret, an orphan with an othermother and absent fathers. She is a member of the despised Masarwa¹⁷ by birth but British by upbringing in colonial Botswana or Bechuanaland. With her yellow skin, she can pass as Chinese, bi-racial, or 'coloured'. Her anglicized accent and excellent academic record enable her to obtain a teaching position in a village that discriminates against the Masarwa. She infiltrates the royal class by disarming them with her behaviour and her drawings, and she ends up marrying the chief. Their marriage brings about the revolution that frees the Masarwa.

The story is magical, like any fairy tale. The following quotation will provide an inkling of the milieu:

I have a funny feeling about Sheba [the goat in the novel]. [...] I think she is a human being in disguise. Have you heard about the witches in this country? They can turn themselves into lions and buffalo. Sheba was once a witch who was starving and turned herself into a goat. She behaves just like a beggar who is also a blackmailer.¹⁸

So says Dikeledi to her friend Margaret, playfully stating the contradictions inherent in African jujuism, where women are both insignificant yet powerful witches. If the biblical Queen of Sheba tended other people's vineyards without caring for hers (see Song of Solomon, Chapter 1), we have the makings of a social problem. Her dilemma is similar to Margaret's and her compatriots': they provide slave labor for the Botswana and oversee the ranches of rich white South Africans, who, in the apartheid days, flew in to weekend in Botswana. Like Makeda, the exiled Bessie Head, Margaret, and the Masarwa are outsiders. Placed in an alien and alienating position, the woman protests in the first verses of the Song of Solomon, a version of which forms the epigraph of Calixthe Beyala's novel *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*. Head reproduces the protest in *Maru*, as Margaret records her emotions in the drawings that her royal friend, Dikeledi, appropriates, thereby putting Margaret in her place as slave. In spite of this intra-gender jostling, the two-headed Margaret, like Makeda, Sheherazade, and Head, subverts patriarchy and brings about change by engaging in dialogue with men.

¹⁶ Head, *Maru*, 5.

¹⁷ People also refer to them as the San, the Khoi or, denigratingly, the Bushmen.

¹⁸ Head, *Maru*, 111–12.

Margaret's upbringing produces a nomadic subjectivity that frustrates categorization. Her mobility is apparent, as she is woman, animal, and witch – with divine affiliations. Of mixed ethnicity culturally, her body internationalizes her politics, as she is Masarwa, who can pass as 'coloured,' 'Chinese,' and British, turning her into an Afro-Eurasian or the new global woman – "the best woman in the world."¹⁹ Professionally, she is a teacher and an artificer, whose extraordinary gifts prepare her for the role of messiah to the Masarwa and Batswana. Her plurality empowers her to set up a counter-discourse. She mesmerizes the rulers, gains access to them, and, like Makeda, surreptitiously and magically revolutionizes the kingdom.

In *Maru*, the club-hoofed Makeda metamorphoses into a goat, enabling Margaret to form a coven, with the goat as a familiar. As Makeda's cloven foot is an impediment that attracts Solomon, Margaret's handicap as a Masarwa becomes a point of distinction and focus of subjective play. The relationship between Margaret and Maru mimics Makeda and Solomon's, as Margaret, like her predecessor, establishes a consortium with the wise, mystical chief. Margaret's move as innocuous Masarwa into Maru's domain is invasive. However, mobility in a dominantly ethnic and gendered space gingers up a dialogue that indirectly acknowledges the invisible power of women and ethnic minorities.

Just as Sheherazade frees her people with her communicative skills, Margaret's Sesame drawings open the doors to Maru's palace and heart. Serendipitously through marriage, she rises, and her *juju* power frees her people without a fight. In the process, she enlightens others in the kingdom living in the darkness of prejudice.

It is noteworthy that Seretse Khama, the first President of Botswana, also serves as a model for Maru. Khama's marriage to a British woman in apartheid southern Africa of the 1970s clouded his tenure. His diabetes and depression, diseases that also plague Maru, were debilitating. He recovered, transforming himself into the miracle man who led Botswana to become Africa's economic and political success story of the twentieth century. *Maru*, then, is the open conversation that the two-headed Bessie Head, the new Motswana, exiled from South Africa, holds with Seretse Khama.

Maru as a fictional representation of Makeda emphasizes the necessity for alliances for global advancement. Margaret employs the artistic gifts of a Sheherazade to communicate with and win over the ruler, thereby changing her destiny and that of her country. As a tête-à-tête across gender, ethnic, and other lines, *Maru* is part of the arsenal used by two-headed women. For an

¹⁹ Head, *Maru*, 9.

auspicious millennium, men, like Seretse Khama, must produce a meaningful response.

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ROBERT MUPONDE

Roots/Routes

Place, Bodies and Sexuality in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*

A man takes the city by the horns
But a woman seizes the world by the testes¹

IN THIS ESSAY I look at how Edward Relph's idea of place as something "constantly being created and remade by human activities" and his notion of existential insideness as "the deep and complete identity with a place" that is the very foundation of the place concept³ could be used as a tool upon which to start thinking about how the city in Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*⁴ provides spaces for self-making and specific forms of female sensibility and sexuality. I look specifically at the modes of self-circulation that bodies adopt and the images that structure the topoi of female emergence.

¹ Musaemura Zimunya, "On the Streets," in *Country Dawns and City Lights* (Harare: Longman, 1985): 50.

² Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion, 1976): 12.

³ Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 55.

⁴ Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab, 1998). All subsequent page references in the text of this essay are to this edition.

the city in *Butterfly Burning*. I argue that although the city convenes disparate margins and ideas of home/lessness, history and geography, it animates sites upon which women can assume self-directed agency, while men appear to be alienated from time, space, and history.

The waiting-room of history

Butterfly Burning has a very thin plot; as Ranka Primorac suggests,⁵ it is almost banal. An orphaned young girl, Phephelaphi ("her experience slim as a needle"⁶), meets Fumbatha, a much older man and son of a hanged anti-settler warrior of 1896, in a Bulawayo township in 1946. Their life together is mutually fulfilling until two unexpected pregnancies lead Phephelaphi to wilfully set herself on fire.

The setting of *Butterfly Burning* is a place which could be theorized as "emerging or becoming":⁷ Bulawayo – "only fifty years old, has nothing to offer but surprise; being alive is a consolation"⁸ – is a city marked by what Yvonne Vera calls "pauses" and "expectations" (1) in both public and private spheres, an intermittent movement captured in the trope of the "waiting-room" at the train station where migrants from many small towns and rural areas "linger for months with nowhere to lodge. With no direction. They move from room to room and tuck their semi-precious belongings under the wooden benches, on the cement floors." The desire to move and the circularity of movement is captured in the labyrinthine nature of the waiting-room:

The benches are wide and go round the three walls. The front wall is an open archway, with only a partial cover. A smaller arched opening without a door leads to the next waiting-room and another to the next in a straight line but it is not possible to walk through each door right to the end of the rooms. There are obstacles. Bodies lie in rows, raised from the ground, but there is not enough room so the floors are soon covered with bags and restless bodies. From waiting-room, to waiting.

It is the waiting-room of history in which various destinies are shuffled as the trains are shunted from one track to another to move bodies from one destination to another. The nameless restless bodies that are stacked on the

⁵ Ranka Primorac, "Iron Butterflies: Notes on Yvonne Vera's *Butterfly Burning*," in *Sign and Taboo: Perspectives on the Poetic Fiction of Yvonne Vera*, ed. Robert Muponde & Mandivavarira Taruvinga (Harare: Weaver Press & Oxford: James Currey, 2002): 101.

⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 55.

⁷ Fred Lukermann, cited in Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 3.

⁸ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 3.

floor of the waiting-room speak of the potential to move, to seek destinations and horizons. The sight of the inert bodies conjures a sense of trapped mobility, in an immobilized place. The site on which "bodies lie in rows," the waiting-room, is symbolic of movement, hence it stages a fiction of defying disenchantment with the indefinite deferment of motion. What is important is that the migrant's body intimates a time of rupture with "an earlier safety." The migrant takes a chance, seizes imagined spaces, enters them spiritually, leaves the body outside. It is this disembodiment of earlier pasts and spaces that we see dramatized in the waiting-room.

There is something strange in that even if one has not dreamt of any kind of success in coming here, getting back on the train in order to go back to an earlier safety feels like failure, like letting go. The past is sealed off no matter how purposeful it has been, even if the past is only yesterday. (45)

The past is indeed another country, a troubling palimpsest, a body that is fixed in time and space, a route that is buried in the shifting sands of time. The migrant who takes a chance in the city wants to travel light, without an address and a name that would trace his route to his past or fix his identity in a new location. It is in this sense that the migrant can become "a classic example of a 'deterritorialisised' subject."⁹ Zandile, Phephelaphi's real mother, as she walks down the street, comments on the changes that have taken place across gender upon the migrant's arrival and disappearance into the city.

She stopped humming that wonderful tune which said there are now enough girls in Makokoba, with names like Dinah... Melody... Martha... Eukaria... Memory... Bella... Jane and Julie... What happened to Gugulethu... to Ntombenhle... to Zanele... to Ntombiyethemba... Nkosi-nomusa... [...] those humble girls who first arrived in Makokoba back before 1930 before bus tickets did and Sunlight soap, who knew they had come here with a true and unconfused purpose, to cure the persistent loss in their men, the women who brought still clinging to their hair and eyebrows the smell of country fires and burning wood, who knew something about the bitter sweet taste of curdled sour milk [...].¹⁰

⁹ David Atkinson, "Nomadic Strategies and Colonial Governance: Domination and Resistance in Cyrenacia, 1923–1932," in *Entanglements of Power: Geographies of Domination/Resistance*, ed. Joanne Sharp, Paul Routledge, Chris Philo & Ronan Paddison (London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 97.

¹⁰ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 78.

The migrant and the city

The figure of the migrant, like the idealized nomad of postmodernism, is celebrated for his perpetual, subversive movement and displacement. The migrant becomes what David Atkinson called "a metaphorical trope for non-fixity, anti-essentialism and mobility as resistance to the bounded spaces and orders of modern society."¹¹ The city in *Butterfly Burning* is a place of social and cultural flux, in which embodied mobility is a form of "embodied opposition"¹² to the structures of colonial spaces. Embodied opposition, according to Paul Stoller, is a form of "unarmed opposition," or "little-discussed everyday behaviours" often called "cultural resistance." Stoller argues that these everyday behaviours of the colonized "are in some ways more historically significant than well-documented cases of military resistance." They do, "like all oppositions, involve some degree of risk."¹³

Deliwe, a fifty-year-old woman, confronts the policemen with her nudity, as a shaming strategy, when they come to arrest her for selling illegal beer in her house. On another occasion,

Deliwe had once been locked up for a whole night in a police cell for selling alcohol and moreover in a dwelling. She threw her head back and laughed like a mad woman when she was told that this square shelter with its falling roof, its colourless weak walls and nowhere to make love to a man, was a house. That was when the policeman slapped her. Afterwards, Deliwe always turned her left ear to hear what you had to say.¹⁴

The migrant makes the city as much as he is made by it. The movements of the migrant in the city are diagnostic of an oxymoronic condition, something similar to what Nuttall and Michael, citing Arjun Appadurai, theorized as a "productive new order of instability in the production of modern subjectivities."¹⁵ In *Butterfly Burning*, "The city is like the train. It too is churning smoke in every direction, and when looked at closely, it too is moving."¹⁶ Bulawayo is an 'immigrant' city in the sense that Abdoumalik Simone sees post-apartheid Johannesburg as "an urban system that seems to act like an

¹¹ David Atkinson, "Nomadic Strategies," 97.

¹² Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995).

¹³ Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*, 75-76.

¹⁴ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 50.

¹⁵ Sarah Nuttall & Cheryl-Ann Michael, ed. *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): 407.

¹⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 45.

'immigrant' in its 'own' continent."¹⁷ The city as depicted in *Butterfly Burning* is therefore a fluid diasporic place. It is a place in which the "dialectics of displacement and emplacement"¹⁸ enables the re-imagination of place in which "the mutual interdependence of place and displacement, roots and routes"¹⁹ can be lived out. Place in this sense is new, forming, transformative, reformulated. It is not "inherently nostalgic and reactionary,"²⁰ nor is it about perpetual dislocation and displacement. For Lukermann, "each place has its own order, its special 'ensemble', which distinguishes it from the next place." Although every place is a unique entity, Lukermann believes that it is "part of a framework of 'circulation'."²¹ It is precisely Sarah Phillips Casteel's and Lukermann's understanding of place that valorizes its centrality in identity-making. Casteel argues that the more "exaggerated stress on displacement, making, and movement at the expense of place" in critical theory has had dislocation, and movement at the expense of place" in critical theory has had an unfortunate consequence: "The loosening of perceived ties between identity and territory, which are now no longer understood to be homologous [...], has also contributed to the devaluation of place."²² The migrants in *Butterfly Burning* insist on the "need to establish a sense of place in the face of the recognition that no absolute stability is possible" and that emplacement is "an ongoing, laborious, and always provisional process."²³ Emplaced in the city, the 'deterritorialized' is a subject in the making, whose identity is always in process. In Henri Lefebvre's words, the city is a place of the possible.²⁴

What circulates in the city, in Bulawayo of 1946, are emerging and migrant identities embodied in the narratives that issue out of and attach themselves to the places of self-making in the townships. Sites of circulation are the railway station and its waiting-rooms; the 'shebeen' run by the police-defying woman Deliwe; and the streets. The metaphor and courier of what circulates in these diasporic places is 'kwela' music, a circular, pulsating township music which traces the journey of the migrant on the train to the city; his lived spaces and aspirations. Kwela music is about the brutality of the

¹⁷ Abdoumalik Simone, "Going South: African Immigrants in Johannesburg," in *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, ed. Nuttall & Michael, 442.

¹⁸ Rebecca Walsh, "Global Diasporas," *Interventions* 5.1 (2003): 7.

¹⁹ Sarah Phillips Casteel, "New World Pastoral: The Caribbean Garden and Emplacement in Gisèle Pineau and Shani Mootoo," *Interventions* 5.1 (2003): 13.

²⁰ Casteel, "New World Pastoral," 13.

²¹ Fred Lukermann, cited in Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, 3.

²² Casteel, "New World Pastoral," 13.

²³ Casteel, "New World Pastoral," 27.

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City," in *Writings on Cities*, tr. Eleonore Kofman & Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 147-59.

police. It means "Climb on. Move!" into the police jeep, with a booted foot slamming into your back: "The knees down and the baton falls across the neck and shoulders."²⁵ Kwela issues out of the joy of living, and out of the pain of the "desperate wounds" animated by each experience and memory of rupture and uncertainty, betrayal and alienation. It is essentially a communal narrative, about shared and individual juvenation, and about defiance, hence it is enlivened by Deliwe in her shebeen, an illegal beer-drinking place. Kwela "can carry so much more than a word should be asked to carry; rejection, distaste, surrender, envy. And full desire" (3). This polysemic nature of kwela is enabled by its diasporic roots/routes, which in turn enable multiple, indeterminate forms of identity and experience to emerge in an otherwise over-determined colonial space.

(Post)colonial regulation of spaces

Embodying the tumult of the migrant and gendered narratives is a larger, historically framed space which animates memories (7–11) of the hanging of seventeen anti-settler warriors in 1896 by colonial authorities. "The men are left up in the tree all day and night. [...] The branches bend down. High up the ground, some lower. Seventeen male bodies blown into the branches by a ruthless wind" (7). These memories have resonances in what could be theorized as the experience of the "victim diaspora"²⁶ of the black world. One recalls Lewis Allan's poem on lynching in the American South: "Southern trees bear strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees."²⁷ It is a poignant reminder of the rude abstraction of bodies from, and their displacement in, history. Colonial necropolitics resides in what Achille Mbembe has called "the maximum destruction of persons and the creation of deathscapes." The site of deployment of colonial 'necropower' is not only the body, "but the dead body of the 'civilian'."²⁸

Both the physical and metaphorical presence of the seventeen dead bodies in the tree initiates a new sense of place and a desire to transform the body into a "ground of experience."²⁹ In this sense, the black body in a colonial space becomes "the thematic object of experience"³⁰ with which to resist

colonially induced social and spiritual death. It is not only the "salience of bodies to the creation and recreation of everyday life"³¹ that is important, but also how the subject transforms the body, during and in the aftermath of the experience of pain and death, into "an intentional entity which gives rise to this world."³² For Drew Leder, "we cannot understand the meaning and form of objects without reference to bodily powers through which we engage them – our senses, motility, language, desires. The lived body is not just one thing in the world but a way in which the world comes to be."³³ *Butterfly Burning* depicts sites of bodily struggle against regulation and surveillance, and insists on rooting experience of body as a lived and gendered space.

The novel calls to mind the tenuousness of the regulated colonial spaces in Bulawayo: with "city taverns which have NO BLACKS signs, WHITES ONLY signs,"³⁴ black people "with no power to choose who would govern" (77) who are banned from walking on pavements in the city (45, 77), and who live in shacks whose walls are "thin like lace." The codes of exclusion are bold and legible. It is an order-saturated place, in which movement imitates behaviours in militarized zones. The heavy surveillance of bodies makes it difficult for intimacies: "Long after midnight they pressed their bodies together and tucked into the hedges and let the patrolling police vans drive past" (40). It is a perverted sense of policing and disciplining of space, bodies and sexuality.

There is a sense of war in the city, and every black body is made to act like a fugitive, and circulates in the city with that sense of siege replicated in the most intimate and public spaces. To survive, black people deploy tactical ruses of self-effacement and protective invisibility, techniques of struggle which involve diminishing the presence of the physical body, allowing the "embodied social agent"³⁵ the shadowiness of a threatening 'Other' in the city. Bodies in *Butterfly Burning* acquire "[t]he capacity to vanish,"³⁶ and what Evans-Pritchard called the guerrilla fighter's "powers of dispersal, tactical independence, and perfect knowledge of the insidious terrain, to avoid decisive encounters"³⁷ as a mode of resistance to the overbearing nature of colonial

³¹ Sarah Nettleton & Jonathan Watson, *The Body in Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 1998): 8.

³² Nettleton & Watson, *The Body in Everyday Life*, 11.

³³ Drew Leder, ed. *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice* (London: Kluwer Academic, 1992): 25.

³⁴ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 6.

³⁵ Sarah Nettleton & Jonathan Watson, ed. *The Body in Everyday Life*, 9.

³⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 4.

³⁷ Evans-Pritchard, cited in David Atkinson, "Nomadic Strategies," 106.

²⁵ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 5.

²⁶ Rebecca Walsh, "Global Diasporas," 3.

²⁷ Quoted in *Chimurenga* 2 (July 2002): front cover.

²⁸ Achille Mbembe, "Interview with Christian Hoeller," unpublished, 5.

²⁹ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990): 1.

³⁰ Leder, *The Absent Body*, 1.

oppression. This agility of the black body in the city attaches some aura of elusiveness and indestructibility to the 'enemy': i.e. the black migrant.

Bulawayo is not a city for idleness. The idea is to live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable, offering every service but with the capacity to vanish when the task required is accomplished. So the black people learn how to move through the city with speed and due attention, to bow their heads down and slide past walls, to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow. It means leaning against some masking reality – they lean on walls, on lies, on music. [...] The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sunhats. (4)

The sense of imprisonment and suffocation is captured in "One room. Solid brick walls. Asbestos and cement" of Phephelaphi and Fumbatha's living space, and the repressive presence of unwanted and unwilling surveillant voyeurs: "Fumbatha and Phephelaphi were aware of the thin distance between their breathing and the next room, their thought and the next, their suppressed voices and the room not theirs, their inhalation, their motion, their surrender" (39). The sense of exposure, which suffuses the streets as well as the most private moments in the individual's life, is neutralized by conscious strategies to live the body in its fullness in spite of, and because of, the terror and perversion. "They took note of this fact and quickly forgot it as soon as their lips touched and their thighs embraced, their fingers locked and they fell into a solitary passion, yielded to each other, kept still and close" (40). Sexual desire is in this sense an irrepressible quest for being, which defies the stasis suggested by the seventeen condemned men, "[w]aiting, in circles" (9) for death. The state-sanctioned voyeurism and surveillance of public and private spheres (practices that have the same effect of freezing the black body) are resisted by acceding to them – like 'yessing' the authorities to death! But they are also confronted by the women who follow their men to the city in order to live out their own dreams, despite the fact that the women were not expected in the city by either the colonial authorities or rural patriarchs. The women are even more daring than their men in challenging the restrictions placed on them by colonial society:

The women had other ideas about their own fulfilment, [...] they remained in these single shelters no matter what threat was advertised, they gave birth and raised children on the palm of their hands. Bicycles had either policemen or black women on them. [...] They craved something possessing the hint of rivers or an expanse as wide and fascinating as the sea. (88)

Resistance is formed and takes place in the messiness of the streets and the shacks of Makokoba township. It has its conduit in the bodies of men and women, and in music and sexuality. It is aided by the self-conscious cultivation of what David Seamon, in elaborating his understanding of Edward Relph's concept of 'existential insideness', called a "constellation of experiential ties: a knowledge of how to orient, a feeling for the hidden dimensions of particular places, an understanding of people and events, a sense of personal and interpersonal history in relation to place."³⁸ In a way,

[t]he space of the city is a far more concrete space for politics than that of the nation [...]. It becomes a place where non-formal political actors can be part of the political scene in a way that is much more difficult at the national level. [...] Street-level politics makes possible the formation of new types of political subjects that do not have to go through the formal political system.³⁹

A deep sense of 'existential insideness' felt by Zandile, Deliwe, Phephelaphi and Fumbatha in the city creates a resilient community of gendered practice rooted in the desire to 'move' and live. For Deliwe, "[h]er Africa meant Sidojiwe E2" (53), the longest street in Makokoba. Zandile prides herself on her sexual contacts and her knowledge of every corner and every history of the street in addition to her sense of achievement: "I built my own house in Makokoba not out of asbestos sheets, but out of brick and cement. It is one room, but it is my own solid shelter" (110–11). Fumbatha claims the city because he built it "brick by brick." Phephelaphi's aspirations are rooted in Makokoba; "her idea of progress includes United School" (60), where she intends to train as a nurse. Boyidi, an inarticulate man, hardly has any ambition beyond Zandile's sexual orbit.

Feminizing the city

In a sense, the city in *Butterfly Burning*, in spite of the obvious symbols of repressive colonial authority ("in every police jeep patrolling the city streets are white men with batons, ready to use them," 47), is a feminized and sexualized space. It represents unhindered movement and expression, and, bodily, "the endless pure loss of gravity" (47), for the women, while the men re-

³⁸ David Seamon, "Newcomers, Existential Outsiders and Insiders: Their Portrayal in Two Books by Doris Lessing," in *Humanistic Geography and Literature: Essays on the Experience of Place*, ed. Douglas C.D. Pocock (London: Croom Helm, 1981): 89.

³⁹ Saskia Sassen, "Impacts of Information Technologies on Urban Economies and Politics," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25.2 (June 2001): 417.

semble the hanged men who “remain in the tree for days. Their legs tied together, their hands hanging close to their stomachs” (7), unable to grow and move with the same vigour and agility as the women. Fumbatha is trapped by the shadow of his father’s history, “a shadow in which he constantly searches. April 1896. Fumbatha was born the same year in which his father was hanged” (9). His father is one of the seventeen men hanged by the colonizers in 1896. Unable to convert the memory of his heroic father into a viable genealogy of resistance, Fumbatha is a prisoner of time: “His father a stranger. 1946, like all time before him, waits” (11). In sharp contrast to Fumbatha is Phephelaphi, who is associated with mobility and independence, as young as she is and with a shameful family history. Her foster mother, Gertrude, a prostitute of the same calibre as Zandile, is shot and killed by a betrayed white lover, while her real mother Zandile indiscriminately sleeps with any man in the neighbourhood. In spite of such an uninspiring history, Phephelaphi is able to surpass the horizons of Fumbatha, a man better placed to cut a heroic path for himself by virtue of his father’s death. The “pure loss of gravity,” which could be interpreted to mean possession of self-directed agency and the ability to defeat the dictates of predetermined histories, enables women movement, and what Atkinson calls “rhizomatic”⁴⁰ adaptability, which enables them to sink roots in hostile places in the quickest possible time.

For instance, in a bar, “A woman stands against the wall and dangles an almost true love [...] while she takes slow sips of illegal liquor [...]. A woman sits on the floor with knees raised off the ground [...] while an empty bottle lies discarded under her thighs [...].” These postures are as threatening as they are inviting to men, and can only be enabled by the possession of territory and control of the body language of place. What is striking is the sense of bodily as well as psychological independence intimated unambiguously by the postures:

These women say whatever is on their minds and whenever it is on their minds. They hate misunderstandings so they repeat every word, laugh, and fail to apologize. Apologies are unpleasant, and as far as they know, involve bending the knees right down and coming back up; this of course they no longer have the strength for. (48)

These are the same women that Zandile comments on: those who came from the rural homes, meek, ‘innocent’ and ‘fresh’, and now transformed by what

⁴⁰ Atkinson, “Nomadic Strategies,” 97.

Phaswane Mpe calls “new sets of expectations”⁴¹ in the city, because, for Mpe, “cities are spaces where diversities of changes and expectations are apparently at their most remarkable.”⁴²

There were enough girls in Makokoba but one still wondered what had happened to girls like Thandiwe... Lungile... Ndandatho... Nomasiko... [...]. These were girls bright-eyed but soft like sunrise and much calmer than a breeze. With low restful tones. Quiet voices which made a man feel good for something, and when she was shy before him, he felt strong for something. [...] Such girls had all but vanished. (79)

Rooting the body in the city involves definition and possession of space, and evolving new literacies to relate self to other. For the woman in the city, this process involves re-reading and re-authoring the body for self, away from the standard constructions of male control, a regime whose destruction the city aids. The female-centred bodily inscriptions attach to the ways in which the woman in the city defines bodily pleasure and presence. Pleasure relates to the animation of the sense of body and living, and ultimately the sense of place, and how human intention is inscribed in place.

In the bar, “The liquor is clear like water but burns all the desire from their tongues. The men love this burnt-out desire and follow them home [...]” The self-authored body of the woman in the bar requires a reciprocal re-reading and definition of a ‘good’ woman and ‘good’ sex. The woman in the bar is ‘soiled’ with experience, in sharp contrast to the imagined woman of rural tradition, who should be ‘pure’ and ‘innocent’ in order to give pleasure to the man. The figure of the drunken, independent, tough-talking prostitute liberates the pleasures of the body, and makes the anonymity of the migrant in the city an enriching experience. The woman has a presence about her which insists on visibility, and reinterprets for the colonized the “whole notion of being here” (48). Her “body embodies men’s longing and imagination, not hers.”⁴³ It is a ‘pose’. The idea of good sex, and therefore sexual pleasure, is – as Grace Jantzen puts it – socially constructed:

Sexual pleasure is not neutral, nor is it a biological given or a natural essence. Sexual pleasure, as Foucault has taught us, is, like sex itself,

⁴¹ Phaswane Mpe, “Our Missing Store of Memories: City, Literature and Representation,” in *Shifting Selves: Post-Apartheid Essays on Mass Media, Culture and Identity*, ed. Herman Wasserman & Sean Jacobs (Cape Town: Kwela, 2003): 184.

⁴² Phaswane Mpe, “Our Missing Store of Memories,” 184.

⁴³ Farahani Fataneh, “Veiled References: Narrative Constructions of ‘Exotic’ Female Desire,” paper presented at the Sex and Secrecy Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 22–25 June 2003: 8.

socially and discursively constructed. Our attitudes toward sexual pleasure can be constructed to work for justice or against it, to enhance and empower or to demean.⁴⁴

The women in *Butterfly Burning* deploy sexual pleasure as a tool of feeling against oppression in its myriad forms – patriarchal and colonial. Diana Jeater comments on how the space of the city allowed women to forge new identities that were independent of the patriarchal lineage-based system. Prostitution itself was an act of resistance against the lineage system that saw good sex strictly in terms of heterosexual marriage and the reproduction of the clan. Jeater writes that “sexual identity was an inseparable aspect of lineage identity and not a detachable ‘part’ to be sold on its own.”⁴⁵ She, however, comments on the huge advantages that accrued to women and men who partook of commodified sexual pleasure: “In a profound social upheaval, sex was divorced from the other social relationships and transformed into a gender-specific commodity to be purchased by men of all races.”⁴⁶ Sex in the city is associated with a vigorous, multifaceted sexuality which resists the binaries of race, ethnicity and age. Zandile, Phephelaphi’s real mother, “who makes no distinction between white men and black men when it comes to pleasure” (33), is a prostitute with a social mission and a vision of epic proportions.

All that Zandile intends is fighting mortality. She wants to be remembered, if nothing else at least for her poise, her voice and liberty. So Zandile tunes her intuition to necessity and offers instant consolation. Passion is purchased. It offers many angles for escape as long as one is willing to try rising, and forever falling down. (31)

For Zandile, the moment of sexual pleasure is a moment of truth and connection with place, body and history. When she sleeps with white men, “[h]er disdain is complete” (34). With black men she assumes the role of a healer, and a hearer, a witness to the aberrations of history. It is a moment of healing the wounds and soothing the aches of history:

When she sleeps with her own men [meaning black men] Zandile stays till morning so that they can look into each other’s eyes without the skin of darkness, feeling a touch of shame and sharing a lonely adult pain. [...] It is a brave and lonely togetherness. [...] She spreads the warmth of her

breath like a blanket over her fingers while the man sleeps, then turns the body over and looks for scars but does not ask questions about the line of the whip digging over to the other side, under the arm pit, reaching over the breast and making a complete and fiery circle.

Instead, Zandile brings her head down to the armpit and gathers what she can of the histories of her men, murmuring something soothing and at no cost at all. At no charge. [...] If the man is lying there beside her with his flesh newly cut and swelling, then something has to be done, a bowl of warm salted water, a fresh cloth, and the wound cleaned. Desire is for the slow examining of wounds. (34)

She is like Deliwe, the fifty-year-old shebeen queen with “scorpions in her eyes,” in the sense that Zandile’s intimate encounters with men in the city reveal the horrors being visited upon the black people by the colonizer. While Zandile is the healer of the male victims of oppression, a collector of pain and history, whose means of struggle is sexual pleasure and desire, Deliwe fights the colonizer who inflicts the wounds on the black man by selling liquor illegally (defying the laws of the land) and through nudity (a metaphor for historical deprivation and vulnerability).

Because of these night raids Deliwe always went to bed as naked as the day she was born. She liked to see the surprise in a policeman’s eyes. She took her time dressing while the policeman shouted and called her a miserable wicked woman. (52)

Conclusion

In *Butterfly Burning*, therefore, the colonial city creates new spaces in which newer kinds of body consciousness and sexuality circulate. In Vera’s novel, women seem to be more privileged than their male companions because the space of the city itself tends to liberate and empower them more than it does men. To echo Zimunya, women seem to have the city in a double-bind: they have got it by the balls. Women’s resistance to both colonial and patriarchal expectations is combined with a conscious cultivation of a sense of place and knowledge which make it possible for them to find embodied roots in and routes through the city, in spite of the difficulties inherent in a diasporic space in which absolute stability is unattainable.

⁴⁴ Grace M. Jantzen, “Good Sex: Beyond Private Pleasure,” in *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World’s Religions*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung, Mary E. Hunt & Radhika Balakrishnan (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2001): 14.

⁴⁵ Diana Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion, and Power* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993): 180.

⁴⁶ Jeater, *Marriage, Perversion, and Power*, 180.

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MONICA BUNGARO

Male Feminist Fiction Literary Subversions of a Gender-Biased Script

THE TREATMENT OF GENDER and gender relations in contemporary African literature has undergone a transformation. Cultural shifts in African societies have created an atmosphere in which gender is no longer a submerged category, and even male authors are dealing with gender more and more explicitly. Discarding the ambivalent heroines of earlier works, many more recent African novels by male authors portray the search by female characters for self-definition as a progressive development that affects both their external and their internal lives. What seems to be at stake is a gradual coming-to-terms by male authors with the recognition, understanding, and determination of changing gender relations and with the whole process of women changing things for themselves. Writers such as the Somali Nuruddin Farah, the Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, the South African André Brink and the Nigerian Ben Okri are syncretic products of a modern, migrant world. Each of them has forged from their personal experiences and cultural development the complex meaning of what it is to be an African writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Their status as the new voice of African writing is evidence of a growth in cultural conscious-

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ness that, among other subjects, treats of the epistemological changes surrounding the status of women in Africa.

Farah, Brink, Gurnah and Okri do not constitute a 'generation', nor do they occupy identical positions with regard to writing politics. On the one side, partaking in the mood of migrancy, hybridity and transculturalism of the English-writing diaspora, their novels bring a new dimension that broadens older African perspectives. On the other side, as male authors, they have occasioned a change in the orientation of African literature by engaging with women writers in an open-ended dialogue on gender. Although these authors belong to different generations and contexts in Africa, their latest works may be taken as paradigmatic of a new direction in recent African fiction, a direction that signals an important departure in the treatment of gender matters by male authors. Talking of them as a group, then, is not an attempt to fix them in a particular writing mode; it is, rather, a way of suggesting a contrastive organizing principle for what I call 'male feminist writing'.

The most striking feature of any conceptualization of male feminist writing lies in the evident paradox that informs it. If feminism is, by antonomasia, an ideology, theory and technique characterized by its commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism,¹ and if patriarchy, in the popular sense, is defined "as male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women,"² how can men possibly be engaged with feminism? One could argue that female writers are not automatically authoritative on the subject of feminism, although to a certain extent the voice of the oppressed can be read as authoritative: a tale told from the point of view of the victim carries an indisputable weight of authority. In principle, men can be feminists, but they cannot be women. Under patriarchy, men will always speak from a different position than women and any analysis of male political and narrative strategies must take this difference into account. As Luce Irigaray says, "I will never be in a man's place, a man will never be in mine.

Whatever the possible identifications, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other – they are irreducible the one to the other."³

If we accept this idea of essential gender difference as an operating fact, then it will always be necessary to engage in a vigorous critique of the ways in which male writers treat their female characters. However, consigning all male authors to the heap of hopeless patriarchs denies the complexity of their literary creations. Cixous' famous exhortations that "woman must write woman and man man"⁴ must be broadened to include an acknowledgement of those male writers whose texts manage a genuine portrayal of women's subjectivities and values. Still, it must be kept in mind that although some African men are seeking ways of empathizing with women's issues, it is not "the mere inscription of femininity that will bring about staggering alterations in power relations."⁵ In other words, the writings of a few feminist male authors, while they may reflect a growing change in the perception of women across many African societies, cannot in and of themselves implement the major political and social changes in women's status called for by feminism.

The question of African men in feminism is not about who is allowed to say or do what to whom and about whom. Feminism remains women's project and has, like any other discourse, its exclusive mechanisms: it excludes particular people, it excludes some women's discourses, it establishes ways of checking credentials, it coins and controls a vocabulary, and so on. However, it must be stated that feminist male writers do not seem to have any pretensions of speaking on behalf of women or of offering formulations and accounts of women conceived as a stable, unindividualized, and oppressed entity. These feminist male authors are making an effort to transcend standard sexual allegories, hence to resolve the problems of gender in ways that run counter to the biases embedded in African male literary tradition. Their efforts do not, overall, appear to be merely a benevolent mimicry of the skills, techniques, and issues that inform feminist approaches. Rather, men are now entering feminism for a variety of motives and in a variety of modes; one could even argue that if men engage in feminist discursive practices they do so not merely in intellectual admiration or out of a sense of justice, but perhaps because it is in their own interest. They may either find irresistible the

³ Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984): 19–20. See also Rosalind Coward, "Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?," in *Feminist Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986): 155–60.

⁴ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" ["Le Rire de la Méduse," 1975] in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks & Isabelle de Courtivron, tr. Keith & Paula Cohen (London: Harvester, 1981): 247.

⁵ Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 253.

¹ See Paulina Palmer, *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory* (Hertfordshire: Harvester-Wheatsheaf, 1989). See also Filomena Steady's definition of 'true feminism' in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge MA: Schenkman, 1981): 7–41.

² Veronica Beechey, "On Patriarchy," *Feminist Review* 3 (1989): 66. For a deeper analysis of the use of the term and its concomitant implications in different societies, see also: Rosalind Coward, *Patriarchal Precedents* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983); Sylvia Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Geoff Dench, *Transforming Men: Changing Patterns of Dependence and Dominance in Gender Relations* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction, 1995); April Gordon, *Transforming Capitalism and Patriarchy: Gender Development in Africa* (London: Boulder Collective, 1996).

compelling vitality apparent in the field of intellectual literary feminism or they may find feminism a practical, culturally rewarding way to engage in the greater issues of power and powerlessness that inform so much writing from emerging nations. Wherever the truth lies, these writers have decided to run the risk of raising the ire of women, or, more specifically, feminists, who could view these authors' efforts in giving voice to the traditionally marginalized as provocative, offensive, and troublesome. By giving voice to the 'voiceless' Other, these men could be seen as, albeit unintentionally, reinscribing female silence.

As African feminists themselves have recognized, "there has been a general shift in consciousness about women."⁶ This shift accounts for a significant and relatively sudden change in the nature of fictions describing female development and female characters, a change that has caused a consequent shift in focus from a general survey of the social world to a more marked emphasis on the feelings and responses of the experiencing female subject. The stress is on the internal rather than the external self, upon the exploration of conflicts and ambivalences in relation to the problematic of self-identity. Even when the social world is depicted in detail it is always subordinated to the central biographical theme of the heroine's development. As a result of this change of focus, novels such as Nuruddin Farah's *Gifts* (1992), Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Dottie* (1990), André Brink's *Imaginations of Sand* (1997), and Ben Okri's *Dangerous Love* (1996) make an expansive and progressive motion towards internal realms, where the authors provide apparently accurate and penetrating portrayals of women, particularly in regard to processes of identity-formation.

The movement towards more sensitive and interesting portrayals of female subjectivity by male authors is a sign of the way in which recent African writing is attempting to break away from colonial paradigms and anxieties. Through their vast and colourful tableaux of female figures (market women, wives, mothers, healers, prophetesses, leaders and prostitutes), earlier African writers illustrated the tormenting world of the double self, with its plenitude of anxieties and alienation. These female characters, if taken as the embodiments of 'things African', are at their best intriguing examples of the alienated being torn by a sense that old, well-known practices and ideals are progressively disintegrating. According to a larger plane that dominates the individual consciousness, the woman becomes part of a collective drama and the prototype of a people whose very existence is determined by the conflicting duality of the postcolonial African soul, drawn to the new but rooted in the old. Through portraits of female characters, these earlier authors revealed the

⁶ Gayle Green, *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991): 58.

transition of their countries from colonialism to independence; as keen observers of African culture these authors could use female characters as a way to look ahead towards post-independence and see the long-range effects of Western influence. In so doing, these writers create a mirror of social realism and place it before the eyes of the African reader.

This practice of using female characters as the embodiment of cultural and political struggle has, however, inevitably involved a process of depersonalization in the characterizations: the female character is forced to function as a symbol of a liberating change in the entire nation. It is no coincidence that the strongest women figures in these earlier works are 'les femmes engagées' – politically committed women who are able to shuck off the burden of cultural alienation in order to forge new paths for themselves. Their victory (or their loss), however, has little to do with personal achievement (as the almost total absence of focus on inner, emotional conflict demonstrates) but undoubtedly stands for the renewal/stasis of the country. Even if Abdul JanMohamed's statement about "the inseparability of the protagonist's existence from his/her social and historical contest"⁷ is still valid for recent African writing, some male writers have nonetheless managed to focus on the female character's self – her life, her interior battles, her doubts and emotions, and, of course, her responses to the pressure of contemporary societal constraints and power-structures (whether of race, biology or class) – rather than upon her potential as a symbol representing the problems of her nation. In other words, it is no longer the 'duty' of female characters to embody the elevation of the colonized woman (and, by implication, a whole people) above 'jungle' status, nor to symbolize the shifts in the mother country's cultural standards.

Farah's *Gifts*: A quest for independence

The heritage of earlier African writers' world-view is readily discernible in the denunciation by Farah, Brink, Gurnah, and Okri of the evils of current society and in their commitment to the cause of the oppressed. Farah's statement that "when the women are free, then and only then, can we talk about a free Somalia"⁸ clearly recalls Ngugi's comment on the condition of women in Kenyan society. In both cases, the victimized woman appears as a metaphor for the nation under dictatorship, and male sexual power is perceived as a further manifestation of political power along a continuum of patriarchal authority. However, in *Gifts* Farah departs measurably from the rather static,

⁷ Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1983): 162.

⁸ Julie Kitchener, "Author in Search of An Identity," *New African* (December 1981): 70.

ideal images carved by Ngugi and makes the female character into a dynamic being who must constantly struggle to redefine her perception of self in the developing context of Africa and, more generally, the world. This choice of characterization is closely connected to Farah's unique sensitivity towards the situation of women in traditional Somali society. The novel's most outstanding feature is, in fact, the extent to which Farah makes it a woman's novel. Not only do all of the ideas and actions originate with women, but Farah also gives the novel a feminine ambience by infusing it with female images.

The life of his heroine is a life of self-narration. Indeed, the first section of the novel is entitled "A story is born," and Chapter One opens with the epigrammatic synopsis: "In which Duniya sees the outlines of a story emerging from the mist surrounding her, as the outside world impinges on her space and thoughts."⁹ Through the description of Duniya's emotions and of her conflicted feelings about herself and others directly or indirectly related to her, Farah reveals the constant struggle of a woman who embarks on the contradictory project of trying to live independently of men in a male-dominated society. The woman in Somali society, as Duniya recognizes, "is a homeless person property-less" (171) because she is herself a piece of property. Duniya, in fact, is forced to move from her father's house into a series of male-owned houses until, with the help of her rich uncle Abshir, she secures a down-town apartment. But even this alternative pied-à-terre is only another male gift. The multitude of locations functions in the novel as literal or symbolic settings for the enactment of the multiplex, tension-filled drama of the power-struggle between the sexes under patriarchy. Duniya's households are a microcosm of the patriarchal structure that engenders the subjugation of women, denying female selfhood. However, far from being a mere victim of the ongoing system, Duniya makes choices – divorce, her job as a nurse, and her marriage to Bosaaso (the one man chosen by her) – that are hers and only hers. Because of her self-motivated choices, Duniya's gender is a problematic, disrupted presence within the phallogocentric social order. She is the one who "hates when men take her for granted as a woman (89); she is the one who insists on settling half the bill when she is taken out for dinner by Bosaaso; she is the one who is respected for her work as a senior nurse at the Maternity Hospital in Mogadishu.

Duniya's journey through life has been marked by various stations, all of them owned, run, and dominated by men. But, from the start, one gets the impression that the whole fabric of the novel is built to sustain her movement towards a relocation of herself as mistress and controller of her own station. Even when she recognizes herself as "a homeless woman, that is one who has

⁹ Nuruddin Farah, *Gifts* (London: Serif, 1992): 122.

no husband or male relation to provide her for shelter," she reminds herself that "theirs was a household where there was a semblance of individual freedom and problem-sharing, where there was no male authority" (167).

As the reader gains deeper access to Duniya's mind, the character's caution in accepting gifts becomes clear: "As my epitaph I would like to have the following written: Here lies Duniya who distrusted givers" (237). The consistency of her sceptical attitude to givers and receivers constitutes her strength, since she realizes the nature of her position as a woman in Somali society and the power of the patriarchal codes explicitly or implicitly operating in the general African context. Duniya – in searching for alternative ways of being outside the apparently easier but nonetheless compromising solutions offered by the acceptance of gifts – does not let herself be an accomplice to the system of oppression. For her, "unasked-for generosity has a way of making one feel obliged, trapped in a labyrinth of dependence" (20). Gifts to nations, like gifts to people, bind together the donor and the recipient in a variety of ways. Duniya is especially aware of the fact that male gifts may be but another way for men to assert their superiority and dominance over women. Throughout the novel, Duniya grapples with how to enter into a loving, unconstrained relationship with Bosaaso; in the end, she is able to perceive Bosaaso's as an equal, and to accept his gifts without loss or pride. Duniya and Bosaaso's relationship not only gives the novel a human dimension but also disguises Farah's ambitious attempt to link giving and identity.

Farah thus uses the Somali family as an image of the state, as a microcosm of the macrocosm. He is also deeply involved in the representation of the heroine's growth in consciousness as she struggles to assert herself and to challenge male-oriented structures of power in Somali society.

Gurnah's *Dottie*: A black female response to racism and sexism

A similar tension between male-constructed zones and female responses to them is played out in Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *Dottie* (1990). Although the central focus of the work is the subject *en procès* and its play of diverse shifting identities within the larger framework of the political upheavals of the 1950s and early 1960s, a further dimension intervenes in the text. Race (here, read black) and gender (here, read female) are the main stigmatized markers on the practice/politics side of the border, but not the only ones, for they trade places in a fluid system in which differences of nationality, sexuality, and class are interchangeable. In the patriarchal society of this novel, the black woman's predicament is complicated by her status as an orphan. If identity is a site of negotiation that depends on the exigencies of the situation, the black

woman's struggle to define herself within a mixed context of contradictory and acceptable values and references is a never-ending process. Dottie's ancestry goes back to Afghanistan, Punjab, and Africa. Her mother eventually settles in Britain, becoming a low-life prostitute and alcoholic, and dying of gonorrhoea. As a girl, Dottie is troubled by many questions, but none is so dominant as the nature of her identity both as female and as black. Dottie's ignorance of the cultural links to her past and her recognition of the difficulty an individual with no past is bound to experience in a multicultural context are responsible for her endemic identity crisis: "All that Dottie could assume was that they knew of the secret hours she spent dwelling over those beautiful names."¹⁰ Without parents to connect her to a genealogical tradition, she fantasizes about possible names and countries of origin. Under these circumstances, the land the protagonist finds herself in appears strange and terrifying and is often framed as violent, squalid, dark, and irrational. Certain descriptions emphasize the shadowy and grotesque nature of the seasons – "the biting cruelties of winter" (117) – and of locations – "with naked wires, water-filled pits and piles of rubble" (133).

As the 'Other' is situated in absence and deflection, denied any possibility of self-representation by different ethnic groups colliding in society, so the 'Other' as woman is shown to be in constant danger of being possessed by men. The male gaze is something Dottie grows aware of when working at the factory or simply walking down the streets of London. Her mother's sordid past impinges on her when she pictures herself with men, and "the fear of abuse that she had lived with, that Sharon had taught her to be aware of" (107) keeps a firm grip on her consciousness. As products of a deracinated society, the men around Dottie prove unable to provide comfort and protection. Their ill-will towards women seems to stem here not only from a naturalized sense of superiority but also from their own dissatisfaction with life. In this way, men are shown to gain the self-confidence and self-respect that society seems to deny them by possessing women's bodies. For these men, women are prey, "something to pass a few hours with, to torture for the violent thrill of asserting dominance and inflicting pain" (107), victims of male "egoistical hunger" (108). The author's interest in the female condition is apparent in the ways he demonstrates the reach of male power into every area of life and the relentless bullying and exploitation women suffer from men and the institutions these men control.

Unlike her sister, Dottie feels that she does not exist to be experimented upon, psychologically moulded or literally carved up according to the whim of the next aggressive male she meets. Little by little, she rebels against

¹⁰ Abdulrazak Gurnah, *Dottie* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996): 12.

gender and racial apartheid by struggling to find her own money to educate herself and by transforming herself from an object of desire and possession into an agent of her own destiny. In the end, she can say: "It's taken me all these years to begin to find myself, to know what to look for" (332).

Dottie's uncovering of what patriarchy normally subsumes coincides with the author's project of centering marginalized voices. Through Dottie, Gurnah shows that sexual relations between men and women always render explicit the nature of social relations in the society in which they take place, and if described explicitly will form a critique of those relations.

Brink's *Imaginings of Sand*: A tale of discord and reconciliation

In *Imaginings of Sand* (1997), André Brink endows the female protagonist, Kristien, with the ability to remake permanently her place in the world. Brink's novel replicates the tactics of Gurnah's *Dottie* by taking the female viewpoint seriously, but not just to secure women's assent to male discourse and the masculine perspective on gender. Rather, the adoption of a female viewpoint seems to offer a genuine perspective on gender disparities in a male-oriented society. As with Farah and Gurnah's novels, *Imaginings* is not a polemical gender-manifesto *per se*, since larger issues and social problems are also presented. Still, unlike such early writers as Ngugi or La Guma – whose concern with gender issues and reform was a backdrop to more central political ideologies – Brink's feminism does not manifest itself as a mere adjunct to his sociopolitical struggle against imperialist hegemony or exclusivist, nationalist manifestoes.

Instead, in *Imaginings of Sand*, Brink seeks to move beyond the purely polemical or didactic dimensions typical of most of his politically engaged texts and to develop his female characters more fully. In terms of content and the narrative strategies adopted, *Imaginings of Sand* epitomizes the existential journey of Kristien, an educated South African expatriate who had seen in exile the only possibility to escape from patriarchal and racial modes of oppression, the only antidote to the paralysis of depression: "I could see the system going about its inexorable business. After a few days I couldn't stand it anymore. So I fled."¹¹

But, like the history of South Africa itself, the book has many layers and also many truths. It is about discord and reconciliation: between Kristien and Anna (her downtrodden sister), between Kristien and the country she had

¹¹ André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1997): 139, 244.

sworn never to return to, between men and women, new and old, black and white, dreams and reality. Besides the sociopolitical reflections that the temporal ambience of the novel engenders, what comes to the fore, on both the thematic and the narrative level, are gender politics.

After a decade in London, the protagonist is shown to have absorbed Western views of sexual liberation, so that her approach to sex parallels her search for equality within the private and public spheres. Her interest in sexuality as an end in itself and not just a means of procreation is another blow to the South African cultural and social conventions she rids herself of while abroad. In the matter of sex, she shows a relationship to her body that, while Western in its sense of liberation, lacks the Western guilt complex about sex: "I rather liked men, and going to bed with them when the mood was right, but I saw no need for involvement except on my terms." Furthermore, she is perfectly aware of the male gaze and men's desire, of their hunger to prey parasitically and destructively on female bodies and energies. The failed attempt by Casper (Anna's husband) to rape Kristien and Kristien's brief experience of marriage bear witness to men's tendencies to exercise power and control over women by taking the woman's point of view for granted: "'Don't think you can fool me, I know a bitch when I see one'" (236). Casper's internalized myths of male superiority and dominance clash with Kristien's liberated sexual philosophy to the point that, in his mind, the binary opposition 'virgin-whore' that informs his sexist ideology justifies his action: since Kristien is neither a virgin nor a devoted wife, she must be a whore. As a consequence, she not only deserves to be possessed but she will surely like it. Through Kristien, Brink thus endeavours to provide the reader with an interpretative key to the patriarchal norms defined and sanctioned in South Africa.

Kristien eventually decides to stay in Cape Town. Her choice is the fruit of a gradual process of self-recognition and actualization that owes much to the re-appropriation of her history. Kristien's grandmother Ouma, the last repository of family history, takes on the responsibility of re-uniting Kristien with her lost sense of self. By going backwards and forwards in time, Ouma traces the family line, erasing the stories of the patriarchal settlers and replacing them with a female dynasty of magical matriarchs, some so elusive they are nearly bodiless, some as fat as female Gargantuas, some like plants or animals, metamorphosing into geniuses of the place rather than dying. Ouma weaves a huge tapestry by retelling versions of Africa's unique culture from a female perspective. At first, Kristien sees no special significance in Ouma's "jumbles of stories" (80) beyond the sheer enjoyment she derives from them. Her almost total assimilation to foreign cultural norms prevents her from recognizing her personal connections to the stories narrated. But later, the fragments of her grandmother's personal experience and of the female bonds of

her family seem to amalgamate into a credible, recognizable mould of subjectivities "into a history, hers, ours, mine" (126). Once Kristien grasps the full significance of Ouma's stories, she is prepared to change direction for herself and for others: "I used to think only other people had history [...]. It was a train that came past, I boarded it and got off, it was never mine. Now something is happening to me [...]. I can feel it" (325).

If Kristien finds solace and courage in Ouma's stories, her sister Anna is too desperate to see any escape for women. Anna's character brings the reader back onto the path of ordinary life, where a never-ending skirmish between men and women is taking place. This gender war is a dispute that, for Anna, not even the elections may affect: "Man and woman and that's not going to change. Or is it?" (316). Through his creation of Anna, Brink succeeds in giving a raw and unsentimental account of a woman trapped in a violent relationship, but also includes an ironic excoriation of men's mutilating tendencies. Anna grows accustomed to a life of self-negation and violence; her initial inaction in the novel stems from her fear of repercussions in a society dominated by men's constant demonstrations of power: "there is the children, he won't let go of the boys. I don't want them to be like him when they grow up." After years of molestation and subjugation, Anna vents her frustrations on her sister, whom Anna sees as guilty of having abandoned her to her desolate destiny: "When things became too hard to handle you turned tail and ran away, expecting us to sort the mess [...]. Don't fool yourself. You've taken the easy way out" (49). In the beginning, Kristien, in Anna's eyes, is unable to show a deep understanding of a woman's predicament in South Africa. But as soon as Kristien's process of self-definition in relation to her African roots advances, she begins to empathize with Anna's feelings and fears and to invest her sister with the questions she too keeps asking herself about life: "Why is it always *they* who decide, we who follow meekly? Why does everything happen on their terms?" (318).

The result is a double-voiced discourse whose purpose is not only to favour a gradual reconciliation between the two sisters but also to relinquish the voice of outrage that is roaring in Anna's heart: "I don't think I have ever been so angry in my life" (317). In this sense, Kristien functions as a propulsive element in the story, prompting the awakening of Anna's drowsy consciousness from nightmares of aberrant male behaviour and practices.

Anna's character reveals an astonishing mixture of fragility ("I have no money, I have nothing, I am nothing," 318) and determination ("The sooner I learn to cope on my own, the better," 320) that renders her a believable human being with inner passions and fears, dreams and frustrations. Conforming outwardly but inwardly seething with anger over the injustice of male power, Anna finds an outlet for her frustration in the massacre of her family.

Anna's final decision is open to interpretation. Is her act just a pathetic 'suicide run' to liberate herself and her children from the unbearable alienation of their lives? Or is it a flight intended to break the cycle of fear and impotency by a confrontation with the feared? The answer is presumably contained in Kristien's words, "This carnage is the only sign she could leave behind, her diary, her work of art. She couldn't have done it alone. Countless others have converged in her to do this. There were many women in my sister, as in me" (333).

The female line has its own logic of inclusion, and so it includes this nightmare possibility too. Brink's novel is a subtly developed narrative of both destruction and transformation, where even the most obvious ending may bring forth a new beginning.

Okri's *Dangerous Love*: Using and abusing the female body

Ben Okri's novel *Dangerous Love* (1996), through the portrayal of Ifeywa, his female character, expresses concerns similar to those found in the works analyzed above. Okri appears deeply critical of the very values with which community and society invest women. Once again, personal relationships are an important aspect of the narrative. The love between Omovo and Ifeywa is, apparently, the central theme of the novel. Love here, however, is presented as a perpetually disturbing element in which the female protagonist's confronts the entrapping and sterile confines of her marriage. As part of the critique of male attempts to gain dominance over women's bodies and minds, the author's feminist engagement emphasizes yet again the importance of linking the struggle against injustice and the exploitation of people in general with the struggle against the abuse and mistreatment of women in particular. The text, in fact, extends beyond sociopolitical issues, and the existential theme – as developed in *Gifts*, *Dottie*, and *Imaginations of Sand* – is here too a central code in the narrative. With her sensitivity and delicacy of emotions, and her determination to cope with life in a sordid rat-infested house with a man she hates and to whom she has been married off by her family, Ifeywa stands in opposition to the horrifying spectacle of a society undergoing a process of decomposition. The continual abuse of Ifeywa's body by her husband repeatedly violates both her physical and her mental integrity to such an extent that temporal alienation from herself is her only strategy of survival: "In a curious way she felt that it was all happening to someone other than her, to someone she didn't know."¹² It seems credible that her numbness is a way

to protect herself while she is being repressed and repelled by devouring male sexuality.

However, if the depiction of Ifeywa would seem to relegate her to the usual subaltern position of victim, turning her into a signifier of male control and power, the following passage, conversely, signals Ifeywa's attempt to oppose resistance to male brutalization:

She tried to fight him off, but her limbs were heavy and she moved as if she were submerged beneath oil [...]. Then she felt him as he penetrated her, plunging, ripping her open [...]. She felt the tear of her flesh [...]. She bled profusely. She cried all through the crudity of his movements. He didn't enjoy the act. (100)

Ifeywa's consciousness is directly available in the above passage, as proved by the profusion of the referential pronoun 'she' (compared with 'he') and of verbs indicating her inner/outer activity (will, resist, move, fight, feel, etc.), compared with the scarcity of verbs and nouns indicating her husband's activity. As in other emotionally powerful moments in the novel, Ifeywa's sexual encounters with her sadistic husband dramatically enact violence but also demonstrate that her selfhood is not annihilated in the process. Tapko's linguistic and physical assaults on his wife do not erase the heroine's consciousness or write her over, but rather give her a new content, so that now "within her there was a seething fermentation which fed on the morass of her life. She learned to be patient. She learned to wait" (101). Ifeywa's experience of repeated rape and molestation brings out her capacity for and will to self-determination. Forced into a marriage to a man she loathes, she secretly takes pills to prevent an unwanted pregnancy, refusing to subjugate herself to a life of subservience and sacrifice, a life that her fellow women have wholly accepted: "The women bore many children and struggled to feed and clothe them." "Being revolted by the decay of life around her" (105), she relies on education as a means of improving her condition and giving herself a chance in life. But as soon as she tries to go beyond the boundaries that the community has marked for her, "her pride isolated her and made her feel an outsider" (105). Ifeywa's voluntary childlessness and her self-assertion are interpreted as a way of defying her husband's authority and, as a consequence, the juridical and social limits set by the local community and by society at large. Frustrated and disappointed that the girl he married "is not the nice, shy, well-behaved, respectful girl he paid a lot of money for," Tapko, in a moment of despair, attempts to kill her. His words confirm how the female's deviation from the ordinary trajectory drawn by patriarchal institutions must be condemned and punished. Ifeywa's defiance of patriarchy fuels Tapko's anger, bringing out the deforming and mutilating ideology that informs his (male)

¹² Ben Okri, *Dangerous Love* (London: Phoenix House, 1996): 100.

vision of life: "I didn't marry you for decoration. I am a man and I want children" (287). Maternity gives African women a distinct status, but pater-nity confers a similar status on men. A married man with no children has no place in an African society; in most cases, he becomes the object of derision and disapproval. If Tapko's violence and molestation confront Ifeywa with the injustice of her subaltern position and plant in her the seed of revolt, Omovo's sudden entrance in her life "becomes her contact with what was love" and makes her believe that "she too can find happiness and feel more complete" (103).

Okri challenges misconceptions about women not so much by telling as by asking his readers to weigh his female characters against the distorted images his male characters have of them. He approaches women as individuals, presenting them as human beings rather than as qualities or symbols. The novel mirrors a process of enlargement – Ifeywa's personal experience as a woman trapped by her anatomy within the stifling boundaries of a phal-lo-centric culture expands into a struggle between the individual and the outside world populated by evil forces and influences; and the struggle against it may include, as in Anna's case in *Imaginations in Sand*, a tragic reversal.

In *Dangerous Love*, Okri returns smoothly to the brutality of the real world. The evil forces that pervade society are far stronger than the love Omovo and Ifeywa nurture for each other. Such purity cannot be allowed to flourish in the cesspool that is Lagos. Ifeywa's death, in addition to expressing the social implications inherent in the author's vision of the chaos governing his country, asserts the female subject's resistance to being known and possessed, as she crosses borderlines between genres, sexes, and communities.

Conclusion

Many might argue that the story of a woman who writes is always an/other story. However, the engagement of some contemporary male authors in dis-courses of feminism is not merely an example of men contributing to women's equal treatment by pointing an accusing finger at the sources of op-pression. It is a question of men's realizing the inequality of their own posi-tion in society. Breaking away from stereotypes and myths of female passivi-ty, mystic beauty, deprivation, and, in a later phase, of sociopolitical trans-formation, these and other recent novels by Farah, Gurnah, Brink and Okri show that their literary practices are actively engaged in the process of sub-verting the existing sexual master scripts; their novels neither work to legiti-mize the existing structures of domination nor enclose the binary logic of gendered subjectivities.

The explicit concern with women's predicament and the recognition of the privileges men enjoy in society make these novels into signal examples of a significant movement towards new centres of consciousness. The female characters, sustained by narrative techniques that stress their centrality, are objects neither of denial nor of admiration, but instead are credible human beings, shifting, ambiguous, and contradictory as only human beings can be.

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SUSAN ARNDT

Boundless Whiteness?

Feminism and White Women in the Mirror of African Feminist Writing

IN 1992, THE FUTURE NOBEL PRIZE WINNER Toni Morrison pointed out that a “good deal of time and intelligence has been invested in the exposure of racism and the horrific results on its objects,” but that any examination of racism and cultural identity remains limited when “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” and “the effect of racist inflection on the subject” remain avoided and unanalyzed. Only the inclusion of whiteness as a construction and category makes it possible to develop a complex and dynamic understanding of social and individual cultural identity in its interrelationship to colonial traditions and racist constructions. Morrison continues: “What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on non-blacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered these notions.”¹

¹ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1992): 11.

In the early 1990s this approach led to the development of the discipline which, following David Stowe, is called "Critical Whiteness Studies."² The present article fits into the context of this scholarly approach. Embedded in an examination of whiteness as a construction of colonial processes, it explores the unspoken assumption of whiteness as a norm in the context of white Western feminism as well as the issue of how whiteness is regarded by African feminists. In this connection I will discuss three African-feminist novels in which white women play a prominent role. The literary presentation of whiteness is the prime focus of these interpretations. In addition, encounters between African and European women that occur in the novels are discussed and interpreted with respect to the question of how they relate to the given novel's perspective on the relationship between African and white Western approaches to feminism. Although Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, Mariama Bâ's *Un Chant écarlate* and Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* are more or less canonical texts, this aspect has not yet been discussed in the sphere of literary criticism. This corresponds to the fact that literary scholars have not yet examined conceptions of whiteness in African-feminist literatures – as well as literatures from Africa in general.

Perspectives on the whiteness of feminism

When feminism took form, its proclaimed goal was to reflect upon existing gender relations and overcome discriminatory aspects. However, the thrust of this emancipatory movement and theory was limited from the outset, insofar as its early adherents spoke of women and in fact meant 'white women'. Thus, when women such as Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft criticized the practical realization of the proclamation of human rights brought about by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, they in effect confined themselves to claiming rights for white women. Even though the Second Women's Movement, feminist in its self-understanding, developed partly in the context of the black civil rights movement in the USA, this did not alter the fact that whiteness is the unspoken norm.

Prompted by postcolonial discourse and theories of deconstruction, the concept of gender was broadened in the early 1990s. Part and parcel of this new approach is the assumption that multiple dimensions of identity and difference exist. The problem, however, was that differences such as 'queer' and

² David Stowe, "Uncolored People: The Rise of Whiteness Studies," *Lingua Franca* (September–October 1996): 68–77.

'race'³ are still regarded as additive to gender, rather than as integrative. Applied holistic approaches are still rare within the context of gender studies. In addition, non-Western cultures continue to suffer from underexposure in Western gender studies. Thus there has been no fundamental change in the fact that when in Western spheres – academic, but above all political – women are spoken of, it is still chiefly white women who are actually referred to. The main problem here is that this is neither thematized nor reflected upon. When non-white women are being discussed, however, their non-whiteness is marked. While a white feminist will simply refer to herself as a 'feminist', an African American woman will generally be marked as a 'black feminist'.

This approach is rooted in whites' general tendency to consider whiteness as a form of normality. As the psychologist Ursula Wachendorfer has shown, when whites describe themselves, they mention aspects such as profession, age, gender, religious orientation, and marital status. All these aspects are no doubt mentioned because they themselves regard them as important and wish others to do so as well. As a rule, whiteness is not consciously present as part of the concept of self.⁴ When asked about this, white Germans usually reply that they do not mention their whiteness, because it does not say anything about their own lives and that, moreover, they reject these 'racial' attributions as dangerous. In so doing, however, they fail to realize that these constructions are an historical reality. Just as patriarchal social structures result in an internalization of patriarchal gender roles, black and white patterns of thought and behaviour, social and cultural experiences as well as the sociopolitical identities and privileges based on them have developed in a context of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and racism.

Whiteness as a social and cultural identity encompasses not only the establishment of whiteness as a norm, but also its embeddedness in the racist discourse.⁵ For the very reason that colonialism and the slave trade have not been sufficiently reappraised by Western societies, they continue to exercise an immense power over attitudes. However, whiteness also encompasses the privileges resulting from historical and current global power-structures and

³ When speaking of 'race' or 'racial identity' in this essay, the sociopolitical and analytical category of 'race' is referred to. But I use the term in quotation marks to indicate that human beings cannot be classified by biological races.

⁴ Ursula Wachendorfer, "Weiß-Sein in Deutschland: Zur Unsichtbarkeit einer herrschenden Normalität," in *AfrikaBilder: Studien zu Rassismus in Deutschland*, ed. Susan Arndt (Münster: Unrast, 2001): 84.

⁵ For Germany, see, for example, Siegfried Jäger, *BrandSätze: Rassismus im Alltag* (Duisburg: DISS Studien, 1992).

economic hierarchies. An examination of whiteness is tantamount to reflecting upon these processes.

Against this background, it becomes clear why it is fatal, in an emancipatory, political sense, to fail to perceive blacks in their blackness and whites in their whiteness. This also demonstrates why it is unacceptable for white feminists to assume a universal 'woman-ness', suggesting to black women explicitly or implicitly that, "after all, we're all the same." This approach becomes even more questionable when it means that processes in African societies are regarded and evaluated without any openness towards cultural differences from white Western perspectives.

The failure of politics and society to face up to racism has disastrous effects. And when an emancipatory and socially critical movement such as feminism takes this course, it loses conviction, indeed legitimacy. And it loses power. This has been amply demonstrated over the past forty years, in which African-American and, later, African feminisms have formed in part as a protest against the whiteness of and racist patterns within Western feminisms.

Alongside the political protest against the 'we' which white middle-class women consider universal, there are also a number of content-related points in which the autonomy of African and African-American conceptions are manifested. For example, many Africans and African Americans feel that feminism has the tendency to exclude men and concentrate on the gender issue. This accusation does require some differentiation, but what is important is that the opposite tendency has developed as the foundation of African and African-American versions of feminism: They want to combat gender relations together with men and in the context of other social problems. At the same time, however, important differences in detail can be found between African and African-American feminisms.

While the innovative force of African-American feminism lay in emphasizing the fact that gender relations must be discussed in the context of the categories of 'race' and social class, African theoreticians pointed out that this very 'race'-class-gender approach is far from being complex enough for the African situation.⁶ They regard gender relations in a more complex manner: i.e. against the background of mechanisms of oppression and social problems such as racism, neocolonialism, (cultural) imperialism, socio-economic mechanisms of exclusion and oppression, gerontocracy, religious fundamentalism, and dictatorial and/or corrupt systems. Moreover, many African Americans understand their feminism as 'black feminism', in the sense of a feminism of

⁶ See, for example, Obioma Nnaemeka, "Introduction. Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins," in *The Politics of (M)Othering. Womanhood, Identity, and Resistance in African Literature*, ed. Nnaemeka (London & New York: Routledge, 1997): 7.

all those who have been socialized under and suffer from racism. Thus they include African women in their movement as well. Theoretical approaches by Africans do not adopt this idea of the unconditional unity of all black women; instead, value is placed on the autonomy of African feminism.

For this reason, Chikwenye Ogunyemi – in conscious distinction not only from white Western feminism, but also from African-American feminism in general as well as Alice Walker's 'womanism' in particular – has conceived an African version of feminism which she too calls 'womanism'.⁷ In her words,

As for us, we cannot take the African American situation and its own peculiarities and impose it on Africa, particularly as Africa is so big and culturally diverse. When I was thinking about womanism, I was thinking about those areas which are relevant for Africans, but which blacks in America cannot deal with – issues like extreme poverty and in-law problems, such as older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives or men oppressing their wives. Religious fundamentalism is another such African problem that is not really relevant to African Americans.⁸

There is no doubt that the declaration of a 'black sisterhood' differs quite fundamentally from the 'global sisterhood' declared by the whites. While the latter operates in the tenor of the racist discourse, it is precisely this experience of racism upon which the African-American aspiration toward a black feminism is based. No one would question this commonality – nor the existence of common cultural roots, ancestors, and decisive historical commonalities among Africans and African Americans – but due to the specificities of

⁷ See Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11 (1985–86): 63–80; Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*.

⁸ Susan Arndt, "Of Womanism and Bearded Women: An Interview with Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and Wanjira Muthoni," *ANA Review* (October–December, 1998): 2. Others, such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (now: Molara Ogundipe) and Mary Kolawole, have developed other African concepts of feminism; see Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context," in Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves. African Women and Critical Transformations* (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1994): 207–41, and Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1997). For a detailed examination of the reception of feminism in Africa and African alternative concepts to feminism, see Susan Arndt, *The Dynamics of African: Defining and Classifying African-Feminist Literatures Feminism* (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 2002).

cultural, historical, and political developments in African countries the voices from Africa must also be respected in their autonomy.

Above all, however, this realization must be taken seriously in the spheres of white feminism. First and foremost, this requires proactive reflection upon the whiteness of feminist movements and theories, both historically and in the present. The critical examination of feminism's eurocentric and racist tendencies is only one step, however. As each and every white, as part of Western society, independent of their approach to feminist practice, still profits from, and bears responsibility for, the racist discourse in the world and its economic and social effects, the confrontation must also include this aspect.

While white feminists have only just begun to participate in this discussion,⁹ black feminists have long since begun to deal with these issues. In the following I will explore conceptions of whiteness which are rooted in African feminist thinking – African feminist novels, to be more precise.

African-European encounters between racism and lesbian love: Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*

Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Our Sister Killjoy* (1979) tells the story of the Ghanaian student Sissie, who travels to Europe on a scholarship – first Germany, then Great Britain. On her journey, Sissie is made into a black – in the sense of Simone de Beauvoir. This is symbolized in the following scene. Having just arrived in Germany she is greeted with the words: "Ja, das schwarze Mädchen."¹⁰

She was somewhat puzzled. Black girl? Black girl? So she looked around her, really well this time. And it hit her. That all the crowd of people going and coming in all sorts of directions had the colour of the pickled pig parts that used to come from foreign places to the markets at home ... And she wanted to vomit ... For the rest of her life, she was to regret this moment when she was made to notice differences in human colouring. (12–13)

Reduced to her blackness, Sissie adopts the socio-political identity of blackness and realizes that the difference thus constructed serves to legitimate dubious hierarchies of power and is the foundation of racism: "someone somewhere would always see in any kind of difference an excuse to be mean. A way to get land, land, more land / [...] Power to decide / Who is to live,

⁹ For Germany, see, for example, relevant articles in *Entfernte Verbindungen: Rassismus. Antisemitismus. Klassenunterdrückung*, ed. Ilka Hügel, Chris Lange, May Ayim, Ilona Bubeck, Gülsen Aktas & Dagmar Schultz (Berlin: Orlanda, 1993).

¹⁰ Ama Ata Aidoo, *Our Sister Killjoy* (New York, London & Lagos: NOK, 1979).

Who is to die / Where, / When, How" (13–16). Even in the airplane she is confronted with racism, when she is seated with her 'friends' (two Nigerians she does not know) so that the white South Africans need not be bothered by a black woman.

The description of her stay in Germany centres on her relationship with Marija – a simple Bavarian housewife who asks to be friends with the Ghanaian. This is expressed when she asks to be allowed to call her Sissie – "a beautiful way," as is explained in the novel, "they call 'sister' by people who like you very much" (28). While the Ghanaian agrees to this request, the author has through various narrative devices long since made it clear that an alliance of this kind cannot be realized. This is indicated in another dialogue about 'self-naming'. When Marija tells her that her own name means Mary in English, Sissie replies that she was called Mary in school, too. Marija indignantly rejects the intimacy that Sissie offers here and stresses that Maria is a German name (24) – and how could an African woman like Sissie bear this name?

Marija's ignorant seizure of something which does not belong to her and her attempt to privilege herself in a questionable fashion manifest her embeddedness in the racist and eurocentric discourse of her society. This is also shown when she says, for example, that Christian missionaries had to go to Africa to save the 'heathens,' or thinks that Ghana is near Canada, after first taking Sissie for an Indian. Through passages like this Aidoo makes it clear that it is not enough to quietly befriend an African against the protest of her society. Such a step is too superficial, for Marija ultimately carries within herself the white society which excludes Sissie and declares her to be an Other.

In her effort to show how racism and power structures make it impossible to bring the two women together, Aidoo also makes a connection between colonialism, racism, and National Socialism. For example, Marija's husband and son are both called Adolf, a name which virtually died out in Germany after 1945. And the narrator emphasizes that "a daughter of mankind's self-appointed most royal line, The House of Aryan," and "a little black sister" who would no longer exist if everything had gone according to the Führer's plan (48), simply cannot become friends. With this construction, Aidoo is not attempting to equate African and Jewish victims of National Socialism. Thousands of Africans and other blacks died in medical experiments, concentration camps and other internment camps, and the longing for a colonial empire, so pervasive in Germany after the loss of its colonies, went through a revival during the National Socialist reign. Yet the Holocaust remains unique.

The narrator's reflection that Hitler's Germany endangered Africans, too, points, rather, to Aidoo's view that there are interconnections between colonialism and racism on the one hand and National Socialism and the Holocaust

on the other – that a mental continuity of racism can be described as well as an ideological proximity between antisemitism and racism. Colonialist and National Socialist practices also have obvious parallels. German colonialism, in particular, was realized with instruments of compulsion such as ‘Pass-in particular, was realized with instruments of compulsion such as ‘Pass-marken’ (passports with indication of race), ‘race laws’, and a policy of extermination. One example of this is the command to commit genocide upon the Herero in the year 1904, which resulted in the death of almost four-fifths of the nation. The Nama suffered a similar fate, with only about half of them surviving German aggression. Ultimately, Aidoo’s parable proclaims a solidarity between the two groups victimized by German tyranny, one that encompasses a dissociation from non-Jewish German women. Aidoo does not take into account the community of black Germans. If one takes the approach of the novel, this disassociation emerges less from the historical guilt of the Germans and their embeddedness in the racist discourse than from the fact that this is not thematized. While Sissie does not have the choice of ignoring her blackness, Marija is not aware of this, nor does she reflect on her personal share of the responsibility for it. Overshadowed by this sin of omission, the sisterhood is doomed to failure.

It is interesting, however, that the relationship between Marija and Sissie turns colonial notions on their head: Sissie is intellectually and morally superior to Marija. The college graduate is contrasted with the uneducated mother, wife, and housewife, subverting the assertion by African feminists that motherhood and marriage are celebrated in Africa but condemned by feminists in Europe. However, in other respects Aidoo follows the mainstream of African feminism. Thus, Sissie’s longing for friendship as well as her inability to be a sister on an equal basis may be read as a metaphoric reflection of the approach of many white feminists to claiming global sisterhood without really being capable of it. Against this background it is understandable that the narrator should pick up on the notion of a universally valid womanhood, so gladly belaboured by the whites, only to dismiss it again immediately:

In Asia/ Europe/ Anywhere: For/ Here under the sun,/ Being a woman,/ Has not/ Is not/ Cannot/ Never will be a / Child’s game [...] Now Marija was saying that she was, oh so very sorry, that she had no hope of ever visiting Sissie in Africa; But she prayed that one day, Little Adolf would go there, maybe. And there is always/ SOUTH AFRICA and RHODESIA, you see. (51)

Just as Marija refuses to explore Africa, leaving the task to her son ‘Adolf’ and identifying mainly with the white settler colonies, the feminist world alliance founders upon white feminists’ incapacity to look to Africa and overcome their white ignorance.

The impossibility of a solidarity between the two women and the cultures they represent is symbolized especially by the scene in which Marija tries to seduce Sissie – first with plums, then with a concrete proposition: “Sissie felt Marija’s cold fingers on her breast. The fingers of Marija’s hand touched the skin of Sissie’s breasts” (64). When Marija’s lips touch her, Sissie breaks free – as if waking from a nightmare: by having Sissie leave the next day, Aidoo symbolically underlines the now-inevitable end of the relationship.

In this scene, Aidoo transfers to Marija the stereotype, common in Africa, that white feminists are lesbians – even though Marija in no way associates herself with feminism. In addition, this scene ignores the fact that this behaviour is not a likely option for Marija and that in 1970s Germany – especially in a rigorously Catholic Bavarian town – homosexuality was strictly taboo and socially sanctioned.

With the invalid generalization that Western feminism aspires to lesbian love, as well as with the homophobic tendency of this pointed rejection, Aidoo adopts the position of a number of African-feminist theoreticians. While Chikwenye Ogunyemi justifies this rejection by explaining that lesbian love is ignored or actively sanctioned in Africa,¹¹ Mary Kolawole notes in the course of her theorizing of womanism that “to the majority of ordinary Africans lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their world-view.”¹²

Aidoo uses this highly problematic construction to emphasize the fact that Marija and Sissie, white and black women, cannot become sisters, because their ‘racial identities’ mean they are on different sides of a world dominated by racism and because, owing to their cultural backgrounds, they have different notions of coexistence.

Speechlessness instead of dialogue: On the failure of the African-European marriage in Mariama Bâ’s *Un chant écarlate*

In Aidoo’s novel, a Ghanaian woman travels to Europe; however, African-feminist literature more typically places white woman characters in the context of African societies. This is the case in *Un chant écarlate* (1982), by the Senegalese writer Mariama Bâ. The novel is set in Dakar and Paris; its three parts tell of a romance between a French woman and a Senegalese man. The marriage fails; becoming psychologically disturbed, Mireille kills her child. In

¹¹ See Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, 133.

¹² Kolawole, *Womanism and African Consciousness*, 15.

the search for root causes, the novel uses a sophisticated narrative technique to suggest that Mireille and Ousmane are doomed to failure not because he is an African and she a European, but by the fact that they do not take into account seriously existing differences and hierarchies – based mainly on ‘race’, gender, and culture, but also class and religion – and neither discuss nor negotiate them. In the following I am primarily interested in the hierarchy of Europe and Africa, white and black, that is constructed by racism and colonialism.

In the phase of infatuation in the first part, Mireille and Ousmane believe that love can transcend existing sociopolitical differences. It is the narrator who is sceptical of the couple’s naivety from the very start. Whenever Ousmane declares that he is not interested in differences based on ‘race’, the narrator describes how Ousmane’s eyes are magnetically attracted by Mireille’s white skin – that is the leitmotif of Part 1. Ousmane is reminiscent of Jean Veneuse in René Maran’s novel *Un homme pareil aux autres*, whom Frantz Fanon’s critical analysis already accused of wishing to ‘lactify’ himself through a white woman’s love.¹³

In the second part, Mireille comes to Dakar as Ousmane’s wife. She is convinced that it is enough to convert to Islam, move to Dakar, and break with her racist parents in order to dissociate herself mentally from her cultural heritage. While Ousmane shares this view at first, the narrator reflects that the matrix of domination resulting from ‘race’, culture, socio-economic status, and gender must of necessity have a more lasting and subversive influence on the couple’s thoughts and actions. For example, the narrator’s observations show how superficial Mireille’s transformation is. It becomes clear that Mireille sees her conversion to Islam as a purely formal matter, and in her attempt to cling to her accustomed privileges, she tries to create a ‘little France’ in her apartment in Dakar. In addition, the novel emphasizes that the life situation in Senegal has been lastingly disrupted by colonialism and racism and that Mireille bears a share of the responsibility for this. In the Senegal of the early 1970s she is thus inevitably seen as a representative of this system, by Ousmane’s parents as well. Mireille makes no effort to perceive or understand all this, and thus she does not know how to cope with the rejection. With this emphasis on privileges and shared responsibility, Bâ chooses a different focus on whiteness from that of Aidoo, who concentrates on her white protagonists’ rootedness in the racist discourse.

While in the second part Ousmane’s glorification of Mireille’s white beauty suddenly subsides, in the third part he ultimately views her whiteness

¹³ See René Maran, *Un homme pareil aux autres* (Paris: Arc-En-Ciel, 1947); Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1952).

as a threat and exposes his own previous lust for lactification. “Mireille? C’était pour me prouver quoi? Ma virilité? Ma capacité de séduire si haut, si loin? [...] Mon but atteint, j’ai senti le vide immense qui me sépare de Mireille.”¹⁴ Under his family’s influence he increasingly comes to assume that Mireille is incapable of living according to the norms and values of his society. He ascribes this to her whiteness in a social and cultural sense. Thus, he no longer sees her behaviour as individually determined; rather, he lends it a sociopolitical component. But at no point does he attempt to make Mireille think about her whiteness. Rather, he regards it as something unalterable which *per se* disqualifies her from being his wife.

While the first part of the novel reads like an extended dialogue between the lovers, the second part contains only a few discussions and disputes between Ousmane and Mireille. Their inability to take the ‘racial’ difference seriously finally leads to speechlessness. The third part, in which the conflict really demands dialogue, is marked by their inability to communicate, which makes the marriage fail once and for all. Moreover, the narrative perspective provides an insight into the positions of other characters. Through this approach it is shown that existing hierarchies can be negotiated and transcended.

But the lack of reflection and dialogue on gender hierarchy also plays a role in the failure of the marriage. What is interesting is that the escalation of this conflict runs parallel to the conflict based on ‘race’. The more Ousmane grows aware of Mireille’s whiteness, the more he retreats into his Negritude, as it is called in the novel. For him, this includes adherence to the hierarchical gender concepts and patriarchal practices of his parents’ generation. He takes a second wife, who embodies traditional gender roles. Bâ’s critical distance towards this figure is manifested among other things in the fact that she is rarely allowed to articulate herself in direct speech. Similarly, Mireille’s mother, who has also subordinated herself entirely to the life and interests of her husband, does not even once have the opportunity to express herself in direct speech. This subverts Mireille’s – albeit partial – attempt to emancipate herself from traditional conceptions of gender, making her into a victim and breaking the pattern of a dichotomous white–black hierarchy.

Mariama Bâ originally planned to call her novel *Le tertre abandonné* [The abandoned hill] – a title that alludes to a well-known Wolof proverb: ‘When you leave your hill, every hill you climb from then on will collapse’. Only at first glance does her novel seem to confirm this proverb; closer scrutiny

¹⁴ “Mireille? What did I want to prove to myself? My manhood? My capability to seduce someone so high, so distant [...] Having reached my aim, I feel the huge void which separates me from Mireille.” Mariama Bâ, *Un Chant écarlate* (Dakar, Abidjan, Lomé: Les Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1982): 205 (my tr.).

shows that she reinterprets it. It is important to know how and from which side one climbs new hills.

The utopia of a plural hybridity which overcomes hierarchies: Calixthe Beyala's *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*

Aidoo's and Bâ's novels imply that the attempts by white women to live together with African men or women fail because they are unable to reflect upon and overcome their whiteness, an attitude that accords with the basic tenor of African-feminist literature. To date, only one novel stands out from this mainstream, imagining a white woman who is conscious of her whiteness and capable of transcending it – *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988) by the Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala, who has been living in Paris for three decades.

In a prison cell in Inningué, an imaginary African city, the Parisian Anna-Claude meets Tanga, who grew up in this city and whose life has been marked by (sexualized) violence. She was tortured in the prison of the dictatorial regime and is now dying. She wishes that she, like Jesus, might die for the sins of humanity, putting an end to human suffering. This hope connects with her white cell-mate's wish that Tanga tell her story so that her sufferings will not have been in vain. But Tanga only agrees to one condition: "Mais auparavant, il faut que la Blanche en toi meure. Donne-moi la main, désormais tu seras moi. Tu auras dix-sept saisons, tu seras noire, tu t'appelleras Tanga."¹⁵

With this request Tanga demands above all that Anna-Claude transcend her whiteness: What is implied here is that Anna-Claude must show herself capable of becoming aware of the privileges she possesses, and of drawing conclusions for her own behaviour. In addition, the critical reflection on whiteness includes relinquishing the racism, colonialism and neocolonialism of Seigneur von Deutschman – who is in name and character a synecdoche for Western societies. But Tanga's demand also includes the condition that Anna-Claude be capable of listening and approaching Tanga's perspective through questions. Any superiority complex, any paternalistic pity or presumptuous attempts to explain Tanga's own life to her from the perspective of her own experiences or to criticize her behaviour from on high would annul the alliance forged. Alluding to feminism, the narrator emphasizes: "Anna-Claude se tait. [...] Elle est bien loin de ces discours d'intello où se croisent et

¹⁵ Calixthe Beyala, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (Paris: Stock, 1988): 14. "But first, the White woman in you must die. Give me your hand; from now on you shall be me. You shall be seventeen years old; you shall be black, your name shall be Tanga." Calixthe Beyala, *Your Name Shall be Tanga*, tr. Marjolijn de Jager (London: Heinemann, 1996): 7.

se froissent des termes en *isme*, tous ces termes en hachoir qui divisent les hommes, les éloignent de la vie."¹⁶

At the end of the novel Tanga is dead, but Anna-Claude has undergone a metamorphosis and become a new Tanga, who describes herself as "Femme-fillette, noire, dix-sept ans, pute occasionnelle."¹⁷ Now she experiences what has largely constituted Tanga's life: she is raped, humiliated, and beaten by men. This expresses Beyala's view that under similar circumstances all women fare the same and that gender-specific commonalities carry more weight than differences constructed in the context of 'race'. This view, fundamentally at odds with the mainstream tenor of African feminism, culminates in a utopia. Tanga's 'donation' of her body, based on the Christian idea of sacrifice, creates a woman who has the competence to become a speaker for the women of the world, transcending nations and cultures. However, the fact that a white woman becomes black should not be interpreted to mean that she ignores existing differences and accepts hierarchies – thus adopting the notion of white feminism that "ultimately, we're all the same." After all, Anna-Claude was able to teach philosophy at the university, while Tanga only had the choice between prostitution and criminal activities. Ultimately the character of Anna-Claude who has become Tanga may be understood as a hybrid person who takes in the difference between black and white, while emphasizing commonalities and overcoming existing hierarchies, and who is able to embody the polyphony of global womanhood.

As Beyala has also participated in the African-feminist discourse as an essayist,¹⁸ it seems reasonable to read *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* as a parable-like confrontation with the relationship between white Western and African feminisms. Whereas in *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* Beyala opposes and challenges white feminism, the sisterhood of the two women in *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* suggests that solidarity between black and white feminism is within the realm of the feasible, as soon as feminists can behave like Anna-Claude. Above all, this involves the ability to reflect upon whiteness and overcome its negative sides. This includes, among other things, her ability to free herself from her centredness upon the Western cultural sphere and her paternalistic tendencies, as well as the ability to listen rather

¹⁶ Beyala, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, 36. "Anna-Claude is silent [...] She's a long way from using the kind of pseudo-intellectual speech in which terms ending in *ism* are tossed about, all those chopping block terms that divide people and remove them from life" (22–23).

¹⁷ Beyala, *Tu t'appelleras Tanga*, 173. "Girlchild woman, black, seventeen, whore some of the time" (125).

¹⁸ See, for example, Calixthe Beyala, *Lettre d'une Africaine à ses sœurs occidentales* (Paris: Spengler, 1995).

than explain. For although Tanga, the African, dies, it is the old whiteness that is laid to rest. The European woman becomes africanized, whereby the 'African identity' is ascribed a greater degree of competence.

However, the fact that this sisterhood develops in prison seriously qualifies this utopia. First of all, it is an open question whether Anna-Claude will ever emerge alive from the prison, which serves as a stage for the acting-out of male dominance. After all, Beyala's men are simply the embodiment of evil, violence, and lack of morality. Moreover, it must be kept in mind that this sisterhood is achieved in a place in which the white woman immediately has experiences similar to Tanga's and thus *inevitably* loses her privileges. However, the most serious qualification is the fact that the author gives Anna-Claude a Jewish background and thus the experience of antisemitism and Shoah. It seems reasonable to ask whether Anna-Claude can in fact be read as a representative of white women, or whether the implication is, rather, by analogy to Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, that there is common ground between African women and Jewish women due to their shared experience of dictatorial violence. However, as Anna-Claude's Jewish identity is mentioned only in passing, and Tanga's demand is aimed directly at Anna-Claude's whiteness, I incline towards understanding this assignation of identity in its symbolic force: a fundamental sensitization toward racism is the basic prerequisite if African women are to agree to engage in dialogue. This also includes sensitization about the dominance, power, and violence exercised by white women.

Feminism as a holistic force of emancipation

Feminist practice did not really manage till now to bring about what Anna-Claude embodies. In recent years this incapacity has been challenged by African-American and African feminists. A feminism has been conceived that does not content itself with questioning gender relations, but also reflects critically upon manifestations of racist discourse, as well as other power constellations. This requires not only a deconstruction of the white history of feminism and the self-understanding of many white feminists, it demands that they examine their own whiteness, their privileges, their responsibility for global power-structures, historically and in the present, as well as their own embeddedness in the racist discourse of their societies. There is no question that this is an extremely difficult process of emancipation. This is exemplified by the symbolic power of the fact that white female characters in African-feminist literature, both those discussed here and others, must break with their families and society in order to live out their friendship and love for Africans. And although they are willing to do this, all of them except Anna-Claude remain

captives of the mind-sets of white society. Since racism is linked to social conditions which are highly resistant to change, they are difficult for individuals to break down. Emancipatory social movements such as feminism can offer the necessary framework for doing so. In this process, the theoretic and literary texts of African and African-American feminists can act as important inspirations and correctives.

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JESSICA HEMMINGS

Altered Surfaces

The *Ambi* Generation of Yvonne Vera's *Without a Name* and *Butterfly Burning*

It was 1977, freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising. *Ambi*. [...] Freedom was a translucent nose, ready to drop. Freedom left one with black-skinned ears. A mask. A carnival. Reality had found a double, turbulent and final.¹

YVONNE VERA'S *WITHOUT A NAME* and *Butterfly Burning* both depict the use of skin-bleaching creams. The *Ambi* generation, as *Without a Name* coins it, refers to *Ambi*, the licensed trademark for the commercial brand of skin care, many of which contain chemicals to lighten the colour of one's skin. A recent advertisement for the product promised: "AMBI believes that when you look better, you will feel better. With a full range of skin care products for your various needs, you too will discover 'Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep' with AMBI Products."² But *ambi* as a prefix means 'both' or 'on both sides' (OED). It appears in words such as

¹ Yvonne Vera, *Without a Name* (Harare: Baobab, 1994): 26.

² www.texasbeautysupplies.com/amskincapro.html [accessed 10 February 2002].

ambiguous, which is defined under subjective usage as “Of persons: Wavering or uncertain as to course or conduct; hesitating, doubtful” and “Of things: Wavering or uncertain in direction or tendency; of doubtful or uncertain issue” (OED), and *ambivalence*, which is defined as “the coexistence in one person of contradictory emotions or attitudes (as love or hatred) towards a person or thing” (OED). Hence, the commercial brand name *Ambi* refers to a sense of doubling or multiplicity.

Skin-bleaching creams such as *Ambi* remove the natural pigmentation of the skin. The process is one of reduction rather than addition, destroying the pigmentation present and disrupting the creation of further pigmentation. Additive processes in cosmetics alter the colour or texture of the body’s surface through creams and powders that are applied to the surface of the skin. They remain on the surface and function through an act of concealing, rather than physically altering the surface in which they are applied. Reductive processes, such as creams that contain hydroquinone, penetrate the porous surface of the skin and physically alter pigmentation at the cellular level. A product that enters the body’s systems in order to change surface colour as opposed to a compound suspended above the surface of the skin, concealing but not altering the substance of the skin itself, is a dramatically different cosmetic practice seeking the same external result.

The fundamental difference between the two actions cannot be seen on the exterior skin, for it is established in the mind. One seeks a permanent and irreversible change, while the other allows two layers, one temporary and one permanent, to coexist. One is an act of erasure, the other an act of decorating. Erasure, permanent and irreversible change, is driven by a desire deeper than vanity. It is a need to not only be perceived as another, but to embody that other. Frantz Fanon defines the “epidermal schema” as responsible for the “internalization – or, better, the epidermalization – of this inferiority.”³ Francette Pacteau notes that Fanon’s term embodies “the reduction of another identity to its corporeal surface.”⁴ The “epidermal schema” recognizes that it is upon the skin, the surface of the self, that all manner of cowardice, greed, deceit and laziness have been projected. It is also upon the surface that humanity’s weaknesses have, with ignorance and prejudice, manifest self-loathing and denial in others.

Skin bleaching illustrates the idea that the body’s skin is no more than a surface. This myopic attention to the exterior transforms skin into a type of cloth. Like cloth, skin becomes a vehicle to drape and present an exterior

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967): 11.

⁴ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion, 1994): 137.

identity to the world. Skin bleaching then amplifies the superficial rather than the structural, surface instead of substance. Numerous scholars have noted the similarities of cloth and skin, predominantly for the purpose of analyzing cloth in relation to skin. Renee Baert notes: “Clothing is a second skin, a membrane that separates and joins, that surrounds and divides. Like skin, clothing is a border.”⁵ Ann Hamlyn writes: “The textile is always, it seems, a surrogate skin, a body at one remove, placed at a comfortable distance, even a given without a corpse.”⁶ Ann Wilson remarks: “A part of the strangeness of dress is that it links the biological body to the social being, and public to private.”⁷ Joanne Eicher, in her inclusive definition, describes dress as

modifications of the body and/or supplements to the body includ[ing] obvious items placed on the body (the supplements) such as garments, jewellery and accessories, and also *changes in colour, texture, smell, and shape made to the body directly*.⁸ [my emphasis]

If the textile is a second or surrogate skin, then Eicher’s definition allows for skin to be read as a form of clothing; the first and original textile to cover the body.

In the context of Vera’s narratives, the handling of skin as a form of dress is inspired by two passages. *Without a Name* describes skin, in place of the expected cloth, falling from Mazvita’s distressed body:

Her skin peeled off, parting from her body. She had suffered so much that her skin threatened to fall pitilessly to the ground. It hung from below her neck, from her arms, from her whole silent body.⁹

Similarly, in *Butterfly Burning* Phephelaphi eventually chooses to end her life, shedding her skin as easily as a cloth:

The flames wrap the human form, arms, knees that are herself, a woman holding her pain like a torn blanket. [...] just her skin peeling off like rind as the fire buzzes unforbidden over her body. [...] Vanishing: the sound of her breathing swallowed by the flame, skin sliding off thin as a promise.¹⁰

⁵ Renee Baert, “The Dress: Bodies and Boundaries,” in *Reinventing Textiles*, vol. 2: *Gender & Identity*, ed. Janis Jefferies (Winchester: Telos Art, 2001): 21.

⁶ Anne Hamlyn, “Textures of Memory,” in *n.paradoxa* 6 (2000): 42.

⁷ Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1985): 2.

⁸ Joanne Eicher, *Dress and Ethnicity: Changes Across Space and Time* (Oxford: Berg, 1995): 298.

⁹ Vera, *Without a Name*, 4.

¹⁰ Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare: Baobab, 1998): 128–29.

While Mazvita and Phephelaphi's exposure is seen as a reaction to the harshness and cruelty of the world in which they attempt to exist, the *Ambi Generation* experience a self-willed mutilation:

The people had been efficient accomplices to the skinning of their faces, to the unusual ritual of their disinheritance. [...] They had lain in rows in the searing sun while their skin fell from their faces, pulled and pulled away.¹¹

Pauline Dodgson also notes the connection in *Without a Name*, remarking, "Mazvita's bodily disintegration is matched by the peeling away of skin as people in a state of false consciousness literally attempt to buy white masks."¹² In both books skin peels to represent the mental and physical traumas in a character's face.

The conflation of skin and cloth reveals a set of associations invested equally in both surfaces: protection, modesty, identity, and the boundary or margin. By virtue of their location, cloth and skin delineate margins. Conscious and unconscious alteration to either surface can be read as an attempt to control and even redirect the identity through which the world judges, celebrates and discriminates against. Mary Douglas illuminates the importance of the margin and offers explanation for the charged and exchangeable roles of cloth and skin when she writes:

All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. [...] The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.¹³

Ann Wilson alludes to Douglas's sense of the corporeal margin:

If the body with its open orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body yet not quite part of it, not only links that body to the social world, but also more clearly separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and the not self.¹⁴

¹¹ Vera, *Without a Name*, 27.

¹² Pauline Dodgson, "Coming in From the Margins: Gender in Contemporary Zimbabwean Writing," in *Post-Colonial Literatures: Expanding the Canon*, ed. Deborah L. Madsen (London: Pluto, 1999): 99.

¹³ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978): 121.

¹⁴ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, 3.

In the case of skin bleaching, skin evokes the margin on multiple levels. As membrane, frontier, boundary and border, skin defines the space between the interior organs and the exterior world of air, water, and contagion. The structure of skin, constantly growing new layers and shedding the old, produces a margin that is at once expendable and vital. Visually, it is from skin that the outward self is revealed to the world. Skin that has undergone bleaching projects two selves into the public world: the fabricated and the natural.

The trope of skin bleaching in Vera's fiction can be accessed through the metaphor of cloth. Thus it seems appropriate, but is in no way meant to dilute the severity of the topic, to draw on a text entitled *Color and Fiber*. Written as a guide to dyeing textiles, the authors introduce the topic with the following thoughts:

The phenomenon of color depends on four factors: the presence of light; colorants (pigments and dyes) contained in substances; the quality of surfaces and structures that may or may not contain colorants; and the mechanism of color perception contained in the viewer's eye and brain.¹⁵

The presence of light

In the communities depicted in *Under the Tongue* and *Butterfly Burning* the "presence [and absence] of light" exposes a racially divided nation. It is a space where one can find, "NO BLACKS signs, WHITES ONLY signs and CLOSED signs which say OPEN on the flip side and dangle CLOSED from ornate door handles."¹⁶ Space is coloured by the restricted movements powered by discrimination. Grey is difficult to discern, life is lived in the presence of white light, freedom and opportunity, or smothered by darkness, oppression and division. Francette Pacteau writes:

Western discourse construes blackness as palpable, entirely visible, and yet empty, null – the presence of an absence. It opposes the reflective 'power' of white – black does not reflect – to the absorptive property of black. Blackness, thus defined in a parasitic role, feeds off light, ever threatening its luminosity with total absorption and extinction.¹⁷

¹⁵ Patricia Lambert, Barbara Staepelaere & Mary G. Fry, *Color and Fiber* (West Chester PA: Schiffer, 1986): 11.

¹⁶ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 6.

¹⁷ Francette Pacteau, *The Symptom of Beauty* (London: Reaktion, 1994): 124.

Gertrude's murder in *Butterfly Burning* exemplifies this discourse. Unable to reflect innocence or worth as the white subject is able to, Phephelaphi's mother is murdered in the middle of the night.

The knock on the wooden door in the middle of the night. [...] the intense darkness outside. She saw her mother standing with her arm resting on the other side of the doorway. A darker screen from the darkness beyond. [...] She could not see who it was, so she watched her mother, a tall erect shadow, her head touching the top of the doorway. [...] When she went to her mother she was not even sure she was dead. [...] It seemed a long time before the blood rose to the top.¹⁸

This 'dark' crime is concealed both by the time at which it occurred and the race of the victim. But the event is framed by an equally threatening and parasitic version of whiteness. On one side is the perpetrator, a "white policeman who shot at her when he found her talking to another man at her door when he called on her after midnight" (122). On the other, the "white policeman" who returns her mother's blood stained and mislabelled dress days later. Pacteau's notion of the "presence of absence" is played out in the utter disregard (or guilty knowing) the authorities have for the identity of the murdered woman. "The policeman had not even bothered to ask her name, even when he collected her mother's body, and not even now when he brought her a dress from a woman he named Emelda" (28). As Phephelaphi cremates herself in the closing lines to *Butterfly Burning* she returns once again to the absence of light, recalling "Gertrude who had the foolishness to trust a man knocking on her door. At midnight" (130).

During daylight, umbrellas appropriated from the bus station cast shadows that attempt to shield the daylight movements of Bulawayo's inhabitants:

The people walk in the city without encroaching on the pavements from which they are banned. It is difficult but they manage to crawl to their destination hidden by umbrellas and sunhats which are handed down to them for exactly this purpose, or which they discover, abandoned, at bus stations. (4)

Here the embodiment of blackness acts as 'the presence of absence'. "To live within the cracks. Unnoticed and unnoticeable. [...] to walk without making the shadow more pronounced than the body or the body clearer than the shadow" (3–4) is the objective of the day. Personal freedom is determined by the colour of one's skin, but, rather than vilifying one colour and celebrating another, as Pacteau notes of Western discourse, here whiteness is inhuman.

¹⁸ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 27.

Both night and day are brutal and prejudiced. A person of colour must conceal their presence, make shadows to move in by day and witness unquestioned murders concealed by the dark. Darkness becomes the oppressive cloak, the accomplice in the racial divisions, but daylight does little to lift the oppression.

Pigments and dyes

Second to *Color and Fibre's* discussion is the presence of pigments and dyes. Fanon relates the experience of racism to a mordant recollection: "But just as I reach the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye."¹⁹ The gestures of discrimination fix the subject's identity at the surface. To circumvent this fixity, the *Ambi Generation* purchases change. The act is tinged with the face of reality:

Newspaper headings covered the dark alley, promised no freedom to agitated people. But there were ample signs of the freedom the people had already claimed for themselves – empty shells of Ambi, green and red. The world promised a lighter skin, greater freedom.²⁰

The ironic and "unusual ritual of disinheritance" purports to offer a way out of the cycle of discrimination and oppression generated by racism.²¹

Fanon writes, hopefully with the same irony that plays through Vera's handling of the subject, of a serum for "degentrification":

For several years certain laboratories have been trying to produce a serum for "degentrification"; with all the earnestness in the world, laboratories have sterilized their test tubes, checked their scales, and embarked on researches that might make it possible for the miserable Negro to whiten himself and thus to throw off the burden of that corporeal malediction.²²

Zandile's day job is to sell skin-lightening creams, the reality of Fanon's serum:

Zandile now worked in a shop on Lobengula Street where she sold skin-lightening creams. [...] Zandile was a marvel in Makokoba, a pioneer advocate of a certain form of beauty; she was regarded with suspicion and

¹⁹ Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 109. First cited in Jay Prosser, "Skin Memories," in *Thinking Through Skin*, ed. Sara Ahmed & Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001): 55.

²⁰ Vera, *Without a Name*, 26.

²¹ *Without a Name*, 27.

²² Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 111.

admiration. She would bring some of the plastic bottles and tubes to Makokoba and sell them to the women in the different streets. The skin on her own face was a soft yellow like egg yolk, smooth with a transparent glow, but she would not afford to purchase enough of the creams to rub along her arms. No one noticed that omission; there were other consuming distractions. Zandile offered the feel and texture of desire.²³

The *Ambi Generation* are surrounded by the "wild and stultifying indifference"²⁴ of Harare, an environment that celebrates erasure. The narrator explains: "freedom was skin deep but joyous and tantalising." In the absence of genuine freedoms, of concrete opportunities and tangible advancements, "Freedom squeezed out of a tube was better than nothing, freedom was, after all, purchasable."²⁵

Spencer Lee Roger notes two determining factors in his study of "Induced Pigment Modifications." The first is fashion, the second "a desire or assumed necessity for obscuring the personal identity of the individual."²⁶ In the case of the *Ambi Generation*, fashion and redressing racial prejudice are combined. The result is a complex message of fact and fiction, the brutal realities of racial discrimination played off against the whims of fashion. The two constantly intersect, charging innocent gestures towards fashion with weightier issues. For instance, alongside the erasure of natural pigmentation is the addition of other colorants such as makeup:

Red mud was spread beneath dreaming eyes. The carnival was barefaced and unbelievable, full of mimicry and death. The women picked their colours from a burning sun, from the lips of white women, then offered their bodies as a ransom for their land, their departed men, their corrupted rituals of birth.²⁷

Red lipstick and orange nail varnish, copied from the imported magazines of Europe and America, become more than decorative surfaces when associated with promiscuity, mimicry, and loss of tradition. If fashion is "essential to the world of modernity, the world of spectacle and mass-communication" and "a kind of connective tissue of our cultural organism,"²⁸ then the fashion of skin bleaching evidences a diseased connective tissue of the "cultural organism."

²³ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 80.

²⁴ *Without a Name*, 16.

²⁵ *Without a Name*, 26.

²⁶ Spencer Lee Rogers, *The Colors of Mankind: The Range and Role of Human Pigmentation* (Springfield IL: Thomas, 1990): 33.

²⁷ Vera, *Without a Name*, 62.

²⁸ Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity*, 12.

Ben Arogundade writes: "The culture of ethnicity-altering cosmetology carried within it the notion that people of color had to overcome their blackness in order to be successful."²⁹ *Without a Name* captures this ingrained sense of lack and inferiority, of "unreasoned ambition" by celebrating the dismembered fashion mannequins:

It was better to begin in sections, not with everything completed and whole. It led to such disasters, such unreasoned ambition. So the dresses hung limp on the women, offering tangible illusions, clothed realities. [...] The ritual was cruelly imitated.³⁰

The fashion mannequin, the simulacra of the European or American model; represents an impossible ideal of female beauty. But in the context of *Without a Name* the use of *Ambi* is at once an act of imprisonment in European ideals and a source of liberation from the current realities. As the narrator mentions later, "You had to wear your own freedom to be sure it had arrived."³¹ Along with their skin, "People walked into shops and bought revolutions";³² trendy bell-bottom trousers under the brand name REVOLUTION. Fashion, although presented as the motivation behind skin bleaching is loaded with weightier concerns.

Spencer's second cause for induced pigment change is "a desire or assumed necessity for obscuring the personal identity of the individual." In Vera's texts the assumed necessity for altering one's identity is linked to the colonial history of white rule in Rhodesia and the continued presence of power struggles determined by race. Homi Bhabha notes that the "discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference."³³ Here *-ambi* appears as a doubling, a "double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority."³⁴ Skin bleaching both upholds the desirability of whiteness and acts as an empowering gesture against oppression. Bhabha's sense of slippage is captured in the

²⁹ Ben Arogundade, *Black Beauty: A History and a Celebration* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 2000): 156.

³⁰ Vera, *Without a Name*, 81.

³¹ Vera, *Without a Name*, 47.

³² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge: London, 1994): 86.

³³ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 88.

³⁴ Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *October* 28 (1984): 126.

Bhabha: "Of Mimicry and Man," 129.

"black-skinned ears"³⁵ of the *Ambi Generation* whose desire for opportunity, progress and the realization of ambition produces a slippage in which self-worth and personal identity are partially concealed.

In many ways, this treatment of skin as a cloth as opposed to the more common approach to treating clothing as a 'second skin' is enacting a carnivalesque reversal noted in the opening passage from *Without a Name*. The carnival as explained by David Danow is "a positive, life-affording potential, in other words, will be shown to co-exist in uneasy alliance with a corresponding affinity for its fugitive negative realization."³⁶ Hence the carnival enactment can exist as a symbolic form of empowerment within the narrative as well as a dangerous and illegal medical trend within reality. *The Ambi Generation* is reminiscent of Wilson Harris's concept of the "carnival visage of pigmentation."³⁷ Andrew Bundy in his introduction to Harris's *Selected Essays* explains that the term *carnival* is from the Latin *carnis* + *levare*, to lighten (alleviate) flesh.³⁸ Bundy extends this linguistic observation to explain Harris's term means "to lighten the flesh or to de-pigment."³⁹ Harris's use of the lightening of pigmentation as a symbol of carnivalesque reversals is similar to Vera's, it is both theatrical and disproportionate, as much as it is grounded and determined by the limitations of everyday life. Skin, in its altered and distorted state, does more than conceal the original colour, it illuminates a core that cannot be concealed, a place where racism has successfully penetrated and disrupted self-worth.

Surfaces and structures

Item three from *Color and Fiber* refers to "the quality of surfaces and structures that may or may not contain colorants." Dye and bleach are absorbed into cloth at different rates. Changes in colour are dependant on the properties of the material: weight, fibre, density of weave as well as the nature of the dye or bleach: temperature, concentration and length of time the fabric is submerged in the dye bath. "In this one case the *Ambi Generation* at least received a permanent mark for the exchange, an elaborate transformation."⁴⁰

³⁵ Vera, *Without a Name*, 26.

³⁶ David K. Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival: Magical Realism and the Grotesque* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1995): 2.

³⁷ Danow, *The Spirit of Carnival*, 74.

³⁸ Andrew Bundy, "Introduction" to *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, ed. Andrew Bundy (Routledge: London, 1999): 74.

³⁹ Bundy, *Selected Essays of Wilson Harris*, 74.

⁴⁰ Vera, *Without a Name*, 27.

Skin is not designed in a manner that easily adapts to alterations of its originally effective structure and substance. Like cloth, the structure of skin is irrevocably weakened through bleaching. *Ambi*, and products of a similar nature, produce a variety of results other than the desired lightening of skin. "Permanent damage to the skin including infected cysts, dark blotches and stubborn acne" has been reported.⁴¹ The BBC reports that "bleaching can cause skin cancer and the poorest people are most at risk, because the cheaper the product, the more dangerous it is."⁴² The increased risk of skin cancer is one of the more perverse results of the skin bleaching trend. The disease is otherwise nonexistent in heavily pigmented skin because pigmentation acts as a natural protection against the disease. Arogundade notes: "In 1980 excessive usage [of skin-lightening creams] led to an outbreak of poisoning by hydroquinone, the cream's bleaching ingredient that works by inhibiting the production of melanin (the natural substance that determines skin-tone and protects against ultra-violet rays and cancer)."⁴³

While creams containing more than two percent Hydroquinone have been outlawed, a black market still exists with products being manufactured in the UK, Taiwan, India and many other countries. The *Sunday Times* of Zimbabwe reports that "British companies sell their creams to agents in Zimbabwe, Zambia, Angola, Zaire, Botswana and Kenya. The agents employ syndicates to smuggle them into South Africa – hidden between goods on trucks, on the top of buses, in car boots and in suitcases."⁴⁴ Alongside the devastating outbreaks of otherwise unheard-of skin diseases, including cancer, in southern Africa there is a bizarre, carnival-like reversal in the presence of these diseases appearing on the skin of Africans decades after European missionaries and colonialists succumbed to cancers and diseases of the skin due to over-exposure to sunlight, so foreign to their homelands. The statistical evidence that a large portion of the chemicals are produced in Great Britain⁴⁵ mirrors in a carnival-like inversion the old colonial trade routes. Admittedly, one could also argue that colonial powers have, in fact, a long and established tradition of importing disease, and now genetically modified and unsustainable food

⁴¹ Dina Seeger & Babalwa Shota, "How They Took My Dignity": www.suntimes.co.za/1999/12/12/news/news17.htm [accessed 10 February 2002].

⁴² Joan Baxter, "The heavy cost of light skin": www.bbc.co.uk/1/low/world/africa/718359.stm [accessed 10 February 2002].

⁴³ Arogundade, *Black Beauty*, 104.

⁴⁴ Dina Seeger & Babalwa Shota, "Toxic UK Creams Scar SA Women," www.suntimes.co.za/1999/news/news01.htm [accessed 10 February 2002].

⁴⁵ Seeger & Shota, "Toxic UK Creams Scar SA Women."

products, trial medicines, and an array of a destructive rather than constructive trade stuffs into colonies and former colonies.

Color perception

The final element in *Color and Fiber's* definition of dye variables, the "mechanism of color perception contained in the viewer's eye and brain," is, hopefully, at this point established in the context of skin to be the presence or absence of racism. Mazvita and Phephelaphi's torn and skinned bodies described earlier represent a perforated and fragmented sense of self. Vera writes:

Was it a surprise then that they could not recognize one another? Ancestors dared not recognize them. [...] On the other side of the streets their skins burnt an ill and silenced song. The streets smelt of burning skin. *Nyore*. *Nyore*. It was like that in 1977.⁴⁶

Cloth, be it textile or skin, acts as a litmus paper for physical and physiological pain. Zandile in *Butterfly Burning* explains: "There was an acceptance of what was placed on the body and what belonged to it; the illusion was flexible. The act of reversal spontaneous."⁴⁷ Regrettably, reversal is not spontaneous, nor is it flexible. *Ambi* is correct when it advertises itself as "Skin Care That's More Than Skin Deep."⁴⁸ But, as Jenni Sorkin explains, if "stains are the sores of a fabric," then the trend of skin bleaching has brought little in the way of beauty to the ugliness of racism.⁴⁹

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⁴⁶ Vera, *Without a Name*, 27.

⁴⁷ Vera, *Butterfly Burning*, 81.

⁴⁸ www.texasbeautysupplies.com/amskincapro.html

⁴⁹ Jenni Sorkin, "Stain: On Cloth, Stigma, and Shame," *Third Text* (Winter 2000–2001): 78.

AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO

From the Horse's Mouth

The Politics of Remembrance in Women's Writing on the Nigerian Civil War

WHEN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR STARTED in July, 1967, Africa – as well as the whole world – was shocked to witness an unprecedented fratricidal carnage, the magnitude of which surpassed any conflict the continent had experienced. Millions of lives had been destroyed by the time the war ended nearly three years later. Ironically, no one could foresee at the time that the Nigerian Civil War was just the first of the many such wars Africa was destined to experience. Compared to the subsequent tragic conflicts that overwhelmed several African countries in the past three decades – Angola, Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Chad, and Congo – it is no exaggeration to say that the Civil War in Nigeria was child's play.

Many scholars of African studies, as well as social and political activists, have identified the violent political and economic exploitation of Africa by the West in the period of colonization as largely responsible for the crises and conflicts that bedevil most parts of Africa today. Slavery, colonialism, and neocolonialism have all been blamed for disrupting and destroying Africa's development and civilization. Africa's underdevelopment and political and

economic instability have been attributed to these forces. A cry for reparation as atonement for the global wrongs suffered by black people in the days of the slave trade and slavery has been heard from notable individuals such as the late M.K.O. Abiola (the president-elect of Nigeria who died in detention) and the playwright Wole Soyinka.

Contemplating issues such as social justice, healing, and reconciliation in relation to situations of conflict, Soyinka asks: "How far back should memory reach? How deeply into the recesses of the past?"¹ In his collection of essays *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness*, he speaks of reconciliation, restitution, social justice, and reparation, which he describes as processes that can recompense for loss, for denial, and for violation. Contributing to recent debates about race, identity, memory, and social justice, Soyinka says:

Memory is not governed by the statute of limitations [...] and collective memory especially is the very warp and weft of the tapestry of history that makes up society. Unravel and jettison a thread from that tapestry and society itself may become undone at the seams.²

But he also warns of the disaster that awaits a people whose gaze is trapped for too long in the past; he claims, "And yet, the opposite is also true. Cling too passionately to those threads in the fabric, even to the designs that have spun out of events, society may lose itself in the labyrinths of the past."³ Some would argue that a people's past trauma must be confronted and its demonic influence exorcized in speech, as well as trapped in writing, in order for healing to take place.

One way communities or nations have tried to deal with the pain of the past is to confront it as South Africa did with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the 1990s, and as Nigeria did between 1999 and 2000 with the Human Rights Commission led by Justice Chukwudifu Oputa. The two Commissions were efforts made by the two countries to deal with the memory of past wrongs in order to achieve reconciliation and healing for those traumatized by the past events.

Apart from the efforts of the state, however, individuals also may seek ways to deal with the memory of painful events. Those who have literary abilities try to record their remembrance of the events, ostensibly for posterity to read and learn from the record. This desire to teach future readers is present whether the writers experienced the trauma in a war or in prison as political

¹ Wole Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory, the Muse of Forgiveness* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999): 20.

² Soyinka, *The Burden of Memory*, 20.

³ *The Burden of Memory*, 20.

detainees. No doubt, it is usually men who speak or write about their experiences while women's voices remain largely absent. For example, more than two-thirds of those who recorded their experiences of the Nigerian Civil War are male. In addition, out of about fifty-five memoirs or factual (non-fiction) accounts written on the war, only two are by women: Leslie Ofoegbu's *Blow the Fire* (1986) and Rose Njoku's *Withstand the Storm* (1986). About fifty creative writers have published books of fiction, poetry, and drama concerning the events of the war, but the women among them do not number more than ten. Most interestingly, although a few of the male writers were from outside the breakaway Biafra, there is no single female writer from outside this area who has re-created the civil war in a full-length work. Indeed, Leslie Ofoegbu and Rosina Umelo, the author of *Felicia* (1978), are white and British. Yet they cannot be regarded as outsiders, because their marriages to Igbo men made them 'Biafrans' and they experienced the war first-hand. Their accounts of the war are focused and written from an Igbo perspective.

The statistics on women writers given above illustrate the silences and absences that are the bane of female creativity in the Nigerian literary tradition. No historical or political event in the turbulent history of Nigeria has attracted so much literary attention or given birth to such a large corpus of creative works as the Civil War. One could ask the question: why have only a few women deemed it fit to write about the war? And why has no woman from outside what used to be Biafra written a novel or a play based on the events of the war? Further investigation into what has been written on the war so far reveals that the female writers preferred to record only the issues that traditionally belong to women, such as the home, the family, and some commercial activities. The overt political and ethical issues male authors wrote about tend to overshadow the female accounts of domestic and private experiences. Women wrote about emotional and familial issues as well as about rape, starvation, survival, and income-generating activities to subvert and counter the one-sided and dominant male perspective. These were the issues women battled with during the war, and the issues remained alive in their memory long after the war.

In Igbo culture, women do not go to war or fight battles.⁴ They provide support services, such as cooking food for the fighting men, and they care for the wounded, the sick, the old, and children in wartime as well as peacetime. These domestic activities are the traditional domain of women ('uwa umunwanyi', as it is called in Igbo). In this essay, I intend to examine which versions of the war account are given privilege by women writers, which experi-

⁴ See Mercilinus Anaedobe & Titus Ezenwaka, *A Short History of Uga* (Onitsha: Ethel, 1982).

ences of the tragic war they explore. In addition to the two female-authored war memoirs mentioned earlier, I will also use Flora Nwapa's *Never Again* (1975) and Buchi Emecheta's *Destination Biafra* (1982) to examine the issues raised. By subverting the dominant paradigms of the war projected by male authors (glamorizing soldiering, depicting scenes of battle, and focusing on women's moral lapses), female writers construct and reconstruct women's particular experiences. Hence, they create a literature that validates women's age-old preoccupations with mothering, nurturing, gathering, cleansing, mending, and restoring. The four texts that will be analyzed are intimate, personal, and passionate accounts of the war as it impacted upon the lives of women and children. The family is the focus in virtually all of them.

In Igboland, women have historically acted as a group to assert their rights and make their views known to the community. There were formal associations or unions, for daughters as well as for wives, through which women influenced their communities. These unions still operate today, although they may have lost some of their former privileges. In the past and even today in these groups, as in most Igbo communities, individual members are not as important as the group. It is the group that gives women their identity. Hence the group speaks with one voice and preserves a collective memory of events and of the history and culture of the community to which the group belongs. The tendency, in this culture, is for women to achieve 'group identity'. As the Igbo say, 'There is strength in numbers ('Igwe bu ike')'. Consequently, very few women indeed achieve an independent personal identity. The question, then, is: could the tendency of Igbo women – and, by extension, women from other ethnic groups in Nigeria or other parts of Africa – to act in groups rather than as individuals be largely responsible for the dearth of women writers?

Writing is an individual act through which an individual's remembrance of an event or experience is recorded or re-created. Autobiographical writing, more than any other form of writing, is one of self-assertion. Especially in Igbo culture, female self-assertion is discouraged. Consequently, few women are motivated to express their individual convictions, particularly in writing. This, I think, is also responsible for the dearth of women writers in our society.

'Nwanyi bu uno' (woman is the home):

Versions and subversions in women's war narratives

In the introductions or prefaces to their works, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Leslie Ofoegbu, and Rose Njoku state categorically what they set out to do when they took up the task of recording their experiences of the Civil War. None of them was interested in writing about the military and diplomatic

manoeuvres; rather, each records the events of the war as they affected women and children. Ofoegbu and Njoku detail, in their memoirs, the ways in which they and their families survived the war. They shatter the rock of silence in order to reconstruct their remembrance of the war. They subvert the culture of 'group mentality' by speaking out for themselves. By asserting their identities as individuals who record their memories as opposed to allowing their views to be expressed collectively, these women writers, wilfully, break communal norms and values. Their success in writing down their experiences helps them establish individual identities and create individualistic self-images.

Ofoegbu claims that her account is the experience of her family.⁵ She does not obfuscate the impression her autobiography is meant to leave in the mind of the reader; the book's front cover declares: "The true story of a woman's fight for survival during the Nigerian Civil War." But it would be misleading to see her account as simply limited to her efforts to ensure the survival of her family. With great aplomb, she narrates her roles as a nurse in a refugee camp, as a distributor of relief materials, as a teacher and motivator of children in a Catholic mission, and as a worker in an orphanage. Her account of how she and a nurse (both of them pregnant at the time) took some of the orphans to hospital is revealing:

Phoebe [...] and I took eleven babies and toddlers to Amaigbo Joint Hospital. When we got there, we found we had to leave the car some way away from the department we wanted. Seven of the children couldn't walk and only one of the older children was above five years. We carried two babies each while the older ones held on to our skirts. Then I went back for the three babies left. I took two and the driver carried one and we staggered along through a crowd of the out-patients who were agog at seeing a pregnant European woman with so many children!⁶

In *Withstand the Storm*, Njoku claims to be writing to provide for her children detailed information about the Nigerian Civil War, which was fought at a time when they were too young to understand what was happening.⁷ She gave her book the sub-title *War Memoir of a Housewife*. Her version is a compelling read for any connoisseur of war literature because it is written from an unusual and neglected perspective: that of an ordinary housewife.

⁵ Leslie Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire* (Enugu: Tana, 1986): 2.

⁶ Ofoegbu, *Blow the Fire*, 111.

⁷ Rose Njoku, *Withstand the Storm: War Memoir of a Housewife* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational, 1986).

Narrating the mental torture and physical stress she goes through as a result of her husband's condition in detention, she writes: "My husband started losing weight and was continually on edge. That affected me directly for I was the stopgap and I took the brunt. He ordered me about as much as he would his soldiers."⁸ Her mothering and nurturing roles are expressed eloquently: "I was kept busy shopping, cooking, looking after the children and keeping them amused."⁹ While recording an in-law's cruel words, she does not include the offender's name, and explains: "This name I withhold from my children for whom I am writing. No one has the right to judge the actions of another, lest the one misinterprets the motives."¹⁰

Our last excerpt represents the emotional undertone of Njoku's work. On seeing her missing son days after he got lost, she jubilates: "As soon as I saw Peter, I jumped up for joy and carried him up with fast beating heart, both of us falling down at the pillar near our tank. It was many minutes before we could get up."¹¹ Her narration of this last incident reminds me of the emotional but vivid account that one Uga woman gave to describe her reaction after she found her missing children in a church in Maryland, two days after the bomb explosions at the Ikeja Military Cantonment.

Ironically, though, Njoku's account portrays her as a more admirable 'hero' than any of the other people who have written their autobiographies based on their war experience. This view of her heroism is based on the evidence of her total dedication and commitment to the task she set for herself throughout the war: to ensure the survival of her family and those around her, at all costs. Her self-sacrifice surpasses that of even the most dedicated of generals, especially those who have chronicled their war experiences.

There is ample evidence in Njoku's book, as well as in the works of the other three female writers, to show that they were aware of what was happening in the other areas of the war experiences, yet they did not choose to record those aspects. Instead, they prefer to focus on women and women-related issues (managing the home, nurturing children, mending broken bodies, and uplifting the spirit of the faint-hearted). They seem to be simply validating woman's role as the pillar of the home. Igbo people express this role graphically when they say, "nwanyi bu uno" – woman is the home."

In an unpublished paper, "The Role of Women in Nigeria," Nwapa refers to *Never Again*¹² as "a war novel dealing with the role Biafran women played

during the Civil War in Nigeria." As I stated in an earlier essay, survival of members of their families is high on the agenda of Nwapa's heroine and other women characters.¹³ Kate, the fictional protagonist, is as committed to this self-prescribed role as Rose Njoku is in her memoir. Nwapa concentrates on responsible married women who are determined to survive the war with their families. These women are focused; they know what they want for their families and pursue it with vigour. Kate vows, "I meant to live at all cost. I meant to see the end of the war."¹⁴ Obododimma Oha points out that Kate's anti-war posture in the novel "suggests the moral superiority of womanhood which men have tried to alienate from war-craft as a demonstration of sexual inferiorization."¹⁵ Nwapa demonstrates women's ability to cope under the stress of war and explores the survival strategies women devise to fight the psychological and physical dislocations that overwhelm them. Trading, buying, and selling are activities that take up women's time in Nwapa's novel as well as in Njoku's and Ofoegbu's memoirs.

In *Destination Biafra*, Emecheta goes even further than other women writers to subvert male dominance, and makes Debbie, her heroine, not only assertive and independent, but also a soldier.¹⁶ Debbie also assumes the role of a diplomat when the Nigerian leader sends her on a mission to Biafra. Emecheta, thus, deals with non-traditional roles of women in her work, unlike other women writers discussed here. However, the patriarchal set-up in the army does not allow Debbie to fulfill her aspirations or command respect among the officers and men of the armed forces. Seeing how impotent she is to influence the war positively at political and diplomatic levels, Debbie resorts to joining forces with other determined women to ensure their survival and that of children. Later, Debbie takes care of orphaned children who lost their parents to war.

Destination Biafra differs from the other works discussed here because of the scope and vastness of its canvas. More ambitious than the others in her narrative, Emecheta highlights the remote as well as the immediate cause of the civil war by exploring the historical and political issues involved. She examines the roles played by some political leaders in the country, which prepared the ground for the crisis and the civil war. But it must be stressed that

¹³ Akachi Ezeigbo, "Vision and Revision: Flora Nwapa and the Fiction of War," in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, ed. Marie Umeh (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1998): 483.

¹⁴ Nwapa, *Never Again*, 5.

¹⁵ Obododimma Oha, "Never Again? A Critical Reading of Flora Nwapa's *Never Again*," in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, ed. Umeh, 436.

¹⁶ Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (London: Allison & Busby, 1982).

⁸ Njoku, *Withstand the Storm*, 99.

⁹ *Withstand the Storm*, 126.

¹⁰ *Withstand the Storm*, 204.

¹¹ *Withstand the Storm*, 283.

¹² Flora Nwapa, *Never Again* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975): 8.

Emecheta's main focus is women and the part they played during the war. Her thesis in the novel is that it is women that hold the key to peace and survival in war-torn communities such as Nigeria and Biafra. This is what binds Emecheta's vision and that of the other women writers together.

Like them, Emecheta depicts the rape of women by soldiers. Debbie is raped repeatedly by federal soldiers while her mother watches, helpless. Emecheta captures vividly the degradation that has been inflicted on Debbie in a passage that could be described as unprecedented in Nigerian Civil War literature in its stark and ugly detail:

She could make out the figure of the leader referred to as Bale on top of her, then she knew it was somebody else, then another person [...]. She felt herself bleeding, though her head was still clear. Pain shot all over her body like arrows. She felt her legs being pulled this way and that, and at times she could hear her mother's protesting cries. But eventually, amid all the degradation that was being inflicted on her Debbie lost consciousness.¹⁷

Njoku and Ofoegbu also narrate how soldiers from the victorious federal army abduct and rape young women in Biafra after the collapse of the break-away state. Hardly any male author features rape in his work, except, perhaps, Eddie Iroh in *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (1976). While male writers largely ignore incidents of rape and the violence it unleashes on women, they focus on women's moral lapses instead. Rape, like battering, is gendered violence committed by men against women. It is women who are traumatized in a rape situation, hence their appropriating the subject as one of the issues important to them, and their dealing with it in their writing.

Conclusion

Most of the works that are written on the Nigerian Civil War are by male authors. Women voices have been largely absent, creating gaps and silences in the information available to people about the war. However, a few women have written their own personal accounts of the war, supplying the much-needed female perspective. In doing this, they have affirmed the validity and relevance of women's roles and activities in the course of the war. All the women who have written full-length works on the war are Igbo by birth or marriage.

Obviously, cultural constraints and social limitations under which women operate in Igboland affected the number of women who wrote about the events of the war. Collective rather than individual memory dictates and con-

¹⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, 134.

trols women's readiness to narrate or record their experiences during war or other such crisis situations. This emphasis on collectivity is partly responsible for the dearth of writings by women on such issues. Women's reactions to crises has hardly changed in Igboland since after the war. Women tend to talk to each other when they experience trauma, but there is a need for them to also record their experiences for the world to know. The four writers discussed in this essay take this important step of publishing their experiences for a wider audience than just their immediate female Igbo community.

There are gaps and silences both in male and female authors' accounts of the war. The politics of remembrance demands that each writer should reveal only what he/she considers important or significant, while obliterating what is considered unimportant. This restriction to what the writer wants his/her audience to know is, according to Obododimma Oha, "linked to the pragmatic position of the text as an expression of ideology. The absence, the 'not-said' is therefore strategic and eloquent as well."¹⁸ In their "woman-defined interpretation"¹⁹ of what is important, female writers subvert the male thesis of "female dependency" in war and replace it with "male dependency."

Telling stories about people's experiences is political. Women ought to tell stories about events they witness for the education and enlightenment of women as well as society as a whole. It is important for the world to read/hear these stories from 'the horse's mouth'. As Charlene Smith, a South African rape victim, says, "Nothing is more important than the story: the story comes first and when that is done one can deal with one's emotions".²⁰

We have a duty, particularly when confronted with horror, to record what happened in as straightforward a manner as possible – horror needs no embellishment – so that those who suffered or died did not do so in vain. Our duty is to tell the world so that it will, hopefully, act against barbarity.²¹

It is my argument that the Nigerian women writers discussed in this essay have done this individually – they have told their stories, recorded them for the world to read. They have made known the life-preserving roles women played during the war. Rose Njoku claims that she wrote for her children, but there is no doubt that by writing for them she ended up writing for the whole

¹⁸ Obododimma Oha, "Never Again?," 438.

¹⁹ Jane Bryce, "Conflict and Contradiction in Women's Writing on the Nigerian Civil War," in *African Languages & Cultures* 4.1 (Special Issue "The Literatures of War," ed. Akachi Ezeigbo & Liz Gunner; 1991): 40.

²⁰ Charlene Smith, *Proud of Me: Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence and HIV* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001): 25.

²¹ Smith, *Proud of Me: Speaking Out Against Sexual Violence and HIV*, 25.

world, for all who will be able to read her book. Her greatest effort in the war was to ensure her husband's survival. In accomplishing this difficult task, she succeeded in keeping her family together. Like the other three women authors, her account demonstrates the role of women in familial and communal survival during a crisis. Women's activities are the antidote to the mass destruction and dehumanization that war configures.

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MARION PAPE

Nigerian War Literature by Women From Civil War to Gender War

Gender and war

THE ENDURING WARTIME PICTURE of 'man does, woman is' has depended on the invisibility of women's participation in the war effort, their unacknowledged, behind-the-lines contributions to the prosecution of war, and their hidden complicity in the construction of fighting forces," writes Meredith Turshen in her book on gender and conflict in Africa.¹ Whether they wanted it or not, women have always been involved in wars, actively in many different roles, passively as victims of violence, hunger, and displacement – yet, in the representation of wars they have remained largely 'invisible'. It was only when women themselves began verbalizing 'their' war and started to question the war myths of the gender separation into 'active men fighting the war' and 'passive, non-fighting women at home' that they became more visible. These myths became obsolete at the

¹ *What Women Do in Wartime: Gender and Conflict in Africa*, ed. Meredith Turshen & Clothilde Twagiramariya (London & New York: Zed, 1998): 1.

latest when wars became 'total' and 'postmodern': civil or liberation wars where home front and war front were more or less identical.²

According to Jean B. Elshtain, the 'absence' of women from war literature has also to do with the question of who has the right to war memories, which is to say that although women were present in the war, their experiences were not considered of particular interest or importance, because war was man's business and the essential roles women played in the war were seen as self-evident.³ If in the past a female author claimed her right to war memories, she broke several taboos, as Margaret Higonnet writes in her study of Victorian and post-Victorian war literature: "First and most important, she articulates knowledge of a 'line of battle' presumed to be directly known and lived only by men." Women were supposed to be silent when men were fighting; furthermore, when women described battles they not only contravened decency and morals by invading the male terrain of war and the male body and its language, they also entered a political terrain forbidden to women. "If she wrote realistically, she could face official censorship for producing demoralizing, unpatriotic texts. [...] a woman who had not been called upon to make parallel sacrifices [...] had no right to criticize the very system that protected her."⁴

Regarding Arabian war literatures, Miriam Cooke writes that today women are more able to assume their own roles in the "multiple discursive spaces" of wars than they were before World War II. In line with many other feminist academics, Cooke calls the female approach "subversive," as it represents a 'counter-discourse' against the 'dominant discourse' and its creation 'de-centres' the former:

[Women's] writings threaten to undermine their cultures' war myths, yet they are themselves always threatened by the entrenchedness of such archetypes. The disenfranchised, who had submitted to the power of dominant discourse, which tended to distort their experiences, are making their voices heard and their faces seen. They thus expose the mechanisms of power consolidation. Their counter-discourses disrupt the order of the body politic in such a way that they de-center and fragment hegemonic discourse.⁵

² See Miriam Cooke, "WO-man, Retelling the War Myth," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Miriam Cooke & Angela Woollacott (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1993): 181–82; Helen M. Cooper et al., ed. *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender, and Literary Representation* (Chapel Hill & London: U of North Carolina P, 1989): xv.

³ See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (1987; Chicago & London: U of Chicago P, 1995): 213, 221.

⁴ Margaret R. Higonnet, "Not So Quiet in No-Woman's Land," in *Gendering War Talk*, ed. Cooke & Woollacott, 207.

⁵ Cooke, "WO-man, Retelling the War Myth," 180.

Akachi Ezeigbo, who has actively demonstrated and analysed the impact of female voices in Nigerian civil war literature, takes a seemingly similar stand. In her essay on "Flora Nwapa and the Fiction of War," she calls Nwapa's perspective "unambiguously feminine."⁶ By this she means a

perspective that is steeped in women's culture and explores the war experience from women's point of view and with a female narrator's voice. This is the opposite of the dominant masculinist perspective which is represented in the war writing of male authors [...].⁷

But can this feminine discourse already be understood as a *counter-discourse* in Cooke's sense, as a de-centering and fragmenting of male-dominated hegemonic discourse? In her latest essay on the topic, which is included in this volume, Ezeigbo argues that female authors have largely focused on family issues and on the survival of their husbands and children – in other words, that they have kept to their roles as nurturers. While I concede that women writers still remain hesitant and insecure in challenging male views on war, I would take issue with Ezeigbo's stance and contend that women writers have used the theme of war to dispute their traditional roles in the family, that they have used the topic of the civil war to engage in a gender war.

Women's fiction on the Nigerian Civil War

The civil war that erupted in Nigeria in July 1967 – shortly after the South-Eastern province had split off under the name "Biafra" – lasted three years and has produced a large number of literary representations. So far there have been over a hundred fictional and non-fiction texts.⁸ Many different versions of the most traumatic chapters of the country's history compete with each other in their representations of 'the truth' and their declaration of 'the victory' (according to official wording, there were neither 'Victors' nor 'Vanquished'). Furthermore, many other basic questions are being disputed up to this day, such as what type of war it was (a war of survival? a war of self-determination? a people's war? a war for unity? a war between two sovereign states? or a civil war?) and who the guilty party was (who or what caused it?

⁶ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, "Vision and Revision: Flora Nwapa and the Fiction of War," in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, ed. Umeh, 478.

⁷ Ezeigbo, "Vision and Revision," 493.

⁸ See Craig W. McLuckie, "Preliminary Checklist of Primary and Secondary Sources on Nigerian Civil War/Biafran War Literature," *Research in African Literatures* 18.4 (1987): 510–27. Many texts written by female authors and published until 1986 are not included in this checklist.

who takes responsibility for it?). Each version of the war is being queried, refuted, challenged, corrected, and exposed by a counter-version.

Up to the mid-1980s, only a few women writers wrote about the war, among them Flora Nwapa with some short stories and the novel *Never Again*, Buchi Emecheta in her novel *Destination Biafra*, and Zulu Sofola with the play *King Emene: A Tragedy of a Rebellion*.⁹ However, since this time more and more women have explored the theme of war in their fictional and non-fictional texts.¹⁰ When women writers invade the "forbidden space," they do not restrict the meaning of war to its military and political dimension; some of them also conceive of it as a war for self-determination both of the nation and of roles attributed to men and women. These writers extend the war's meaning by connecting the individual fates of the female protagonists in their literary works to the fate of a 'new nation', which is ideally peopled with the 'new man' and the 'new woman'. While for writers from within Biafra (that is, mainly Igbo authors) this 'dreamland' is generally linked to the idea of independence from Nigeria, for those writing from outside the war front (for instance, Yoruba authors) the fight for social and political change is only possible in a "new [united] nation" containing improved citizens.

While Ernest Emenyonu and others still seem to be waiting for the "great Nigerian war novel [...] to be written,"¹¹ he and his fellow critics – male and female – were busy ignoring or 'overlooking' literary texts written about the war by Nigerian women. When ignoring the output of women authors proved to be impossible – especially after the publication of books by the *mater familias* of African literature, Flora Nwapa, and her "rambunctious 'daughter',"¹² Buchi Emecheta – the critics treated these authors' texts with open rejection or, at best, judged them with patronizing reservations. Nwapa's novel *Never Again* was judged by Steve Ogunpitan as being "artistically inferior,"¹³ while Akachi Ezeigbo calls Nwapa's "moralising technique [...] irritating,"¹⁴ and

⁹ Flora Nwapa, *Never Again* (Enugu: Nwamife, 1975); Buchi Emecheta, *Destination Biafra* (1982; London: Fontana, 1983); Zulu Sofola, *King Emene: A Tragedy of a Rebellion* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1975).

¹⁰ I am presently preparing a new bibliography of these works.

¹¹ Ernest N. Emenyonu, *Studies on the Nigerian Novel* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1991): 104.

¹² Charles Nnolim, "Trends in the Nigerian Novel," in Nnolim, *Approaches to the African Novel: Essays in Analysis* (Lagos: Saros, 1992): 196.

¹³ Steve Ogunpitan, "The Nigerian Civil War and Creative Strategies," in *Perspectives on the Nigerian Civil War*, ed. Siyan Oyeweso (Lagos: Campus, 1992): 297. See also Wilfried F. Feuser, "Anomy and Beyond," in *Cultures et développement* 16.3–4 (1984): 792.

¹⁴ Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, *Fact and Fiction in the Literature of the Nigerian Civil War* (Lagos: Unity, 1991): 96.

accuses her of "producing 'mere propaganda'."¹⁵ Emenyonu claims that "The author's voice is emotionally uncontrolled and jarring in its pedestrian excursions into trivia," and finds her style "plain and ordinary, devoid of imagery and any form of linguistic manipulation."¹⁶

Other female authors have been accused of "simplicity" as well. Dapo Adelugba calls the plot of Zulu Sofola's play "too simple and transparent to merit serious consideration in the genre of tragedy,"¹⁷ while Olu Obafemi advises Sofola to "strive towards the emancipation of her sex [...] rather than advocate the continued subjugation of the female folk [...] to old, out-dated mores"¹⁸ – a rather interesting advice, indeed, since other critics were lining up to condemn the 'feminist attitudes' of the other women writers.¹⁹

It is only in recent years, especially after Flora Nwapa's death in 1993, that a change in the perception of Nwapa's and Emecheta's war literature has taken place. This shift is mainly due to the critical works of feminist/womanist researchers such as Mary Umeh,²⁰ Chikwenye Ogunyemi,²¹ and others who challenged the "old guard" and made them re-read texts and revise some of their sweeping statements. As a result, Akachi Ezeigbo, still finding Nwapa's narrative technique in *Never Again* "suffused with [...] moralising state-ments," now subscribes this to her "autobiographical mode."²² She now regards Nwapa's "limitations" as her strength, because "[they empower] her vision in a different direction from that of the male authors but equally important,"²³ and praises "her use of images and metaphors to give the reader instant sights into the basic themes that preoccupy her in the novel."²⁴ After Nwapa's death Ernest Emenyonu, too, is full of praise over her dramatic talent when he writes: "Nwapa was often criticized for her poor quality of dialogues espe-

¹⁵ Ezeigbo, *Fact and Fiction*, 97; also 101.

¹⁶ Emenyonu, *Studies on the Nigerian Novel*, 96.

¹⁷ Quoted in: Olu Obafemi, "Zulu Sofola," in ed. Yemi Ogunbiyi, *Perspectives on Nigerian Literature: 1700 to the Present*, vol. 2 (Lagos: Guardian, 1988): 214.

¹⁸ Obafemi, "Zulu Sofola," 214.

¹⁹ See, for example, Chidi Amuta, "The Nigerian Civil War and the Evolution of Nigerian Literature," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 17:1 (1983): 95; Nnolim, "Trends in the Nigerian Novel," 196.

²⁰ *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*, ed. Mary Umeh (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998); *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, ed. Mary Umeh (Trenton NJ & Asmara: Africa World Press, 1996).

²¹ Chikwenye Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/Man Palava. The Nigerian Novel by Women* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996).

²² Ezeigbo, "Vision and Revision," 478.

²³ "Vision and Revision," 482.

²⁴ "Vision and Revision," 489.

cially in her first two novels. The plays are totally different. The dialogues flow smoothly, naturally and authentically."²⁵

Apart from Nwapa and Emecheta, other female writers who wrote about the war are hardly mentioned at all²⁶ – whether wrongly or rightly is not my concern here. Generally, women authors had to overcome more obstacles than their male counterparts in order to get recognition from literary critics. What is of concern here are the different ways of reading literature on the war and showing in what ways the critics' tools of analysis and questions of interests have changed.

The art of interference

The hesitation of Nigerian women writers when interfering in and invading a space traditionally reserved for men becomes particularly evident in introductory notes to their literary texts: dedications, acknowledgements, prefaces, epigrams, etc. These show how self-conscious the authors often are when they are about to intrude into this new, hitherto male domain. Many female authors thank well-known Nigerian male writers in their acknowledgements, as if trying to emphasize that there is a connection between their texts and the respective male writer who lends his male credibility to the female's work. Phaniel Egejuru, for example, thanks Chinua Achebe and Emmanuel Obiechina in her novel *The Seed Yams Have Been Eaten*,²⁷ and Omowunmi Segun acknowledges Niyi Osundare in her novel *The Third Dimple*. At times, women writers even explicitly confirm an intertextual relationship, such as Buchi Emecheta in *Destination Biafra* acknowledging Wole Soyinka for his prison diary written during the war. On the other hand, Emecheta is very self-assured in the preface to her book *Destination Biafra*: "it is different from my other books, the subject is, as they say, 'masculine', but I feel a great sense of achievement in having completed it."²⁸

It is surely not coincidental that the authors feel the need to protect themselves with powerful names, especially with regard to the topic, as though they need male authorization for writing about that war. In men's literature

²⁵ Ernest Emenyonu, "Portrait of Flora Nwapa as a Dramatist," in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa*, ed. Umeh, 371.

One of the few exceptions is Obioma Nnaemeka, "Fighting on All Fronts: Gendered Spaces, Ethnic Boundaries, and the Nigerian Civil War," *Dialectical Anthropology* 22.3–4 Special Issue "Nigeria Thirty Years After the Civil War," 1997: 235–63.

²⁶ Phaniel Egejuru, *The Seed Yams Have Been Eaten* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1993).
²⁷ Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*, viii.

one does not find anything similar; authors thank their personal friends instead or maybe their secretaries (wives) for typing their manuscripts.²⁹

Men at home, women at war

A number of Nigerian women writers question the equation of man with war and woman with peace, the separation of home front from war front, and the concept of friend/enemy. In these authors' explorations of the war, gendered spaces are turned upside down; images, and gender roles and relations, are reversed. Men of the right age for military service, who, during peace time, were free to go wherever they wanted to, are now restricted in their freedom of movement. They either go to the front as soldiers or they hide from their own army, which is always looking for new recruits. Their decision-making power is curtailed. Women, on the other hand, become the sole 'fufu-winners' of the family, owing to the absence of the men. The 'invisible' men – who hide in the bush or above the ceiling during the day in order to avoid recruitment or for fear, and who can only walk around freely in the evening and at night – are secretly despised by women because such men are condemned to an inertia that they often compensate for by being overeager and domineering towards weaker people. At the same time, these men depend totally on their women.³⁰ Such 'invisible' men play only a marginal role, but are mentioned in many texts. The majority of male protagonists in women's works are men who stay at home. Here again, gender roles are undermined, as these men do not appear in the heroic poses of victors but are often older men, who are experienced and responsible, prepared to compromise and to negotiate, as friends of the women.

On the other side, many female protagonists are wives. Flora Nwapa's choice of title, *Wives at War* (1980), for her short-story collection openly defies her male colleagues: Chinua Achebe's belittling title *Girls at War* (1972) or John Munyone's *A Wreath for the Maidens* (1973).³¹ Nwapa's collection therefore proves to be an astute and proud intertextual response to the many *girls* and *maidens* who determine the image of women in men's

²⁹ See, for instance, the prefaces to Isidore Okpewho, *The Last Duty* (Burnt Mill, Harlow: Longman, 1976); Kalu Okpi, *Biafra Testament* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1982); Eddie Iroh, *Forty-Eight Guns for the General* (London: Heinemann, 1976) and *The Siren in the Night* (London: Heinemann, 1982).

³⁰ See, for example, Ngozi O. Orji, *Teenager at War* (Lagos: Ceni, 1995); Chinwe Okechukwu, *When Rain Beat the Cow in the Eyes* (Rockville: Eagle & Palm, 2000): 46–55.

³¹ Chinua Achebe, *Girls at War* (London: Heinemann, 1972); John Munyone, *A Wreath for the Maidens* (London: Heinemann, 1973), the "maidens" being a group of young men.

literature. Nwapa's women are wives who are fighters for their families, strong and independent but at the same time intent on a good relationship with their husbands. The women protagonists of many other texts are married, too, but they are more dependent on their husbands than those of Nwapa's.

The few single women in these texts are mercilessly exposed to the war situation, either at home or as fugitives. That is why their main goal is to find someone who can offer them security. Some have sugar daddies; others join their extended family or friends. Whether married or not, nearly all strive for a loving and harmonious relationship with men.

One of the essential and important roles played by women in this war is that of the *attack-trader*, mainly women who transported goods across the frontline between Biafra and Nigeria. In contrast to the men who have to hide, these women could go everywhere: to the front, and even further to markets behind the enemy's lines. Their radius and scope of action seemed unlimited, or, at least, it was extended substantially after the war began. These women were hardly ever at home, which is perhaps why, in women's literature, they only act in the background, similar to the fighting men. On the other hand, their trade was regarded as very dangerous; they risked getting raped and shot and, on top of everything, their situation was considered morally reprehensible because they were said to make huge profits. Above all, their permit for passing between the fronts was said to be obtained by granting sexual favours. It is not surprising, therefore, that their role is mentioned in nearly all the texts but not described in detail anywhere, not even by Emecheta.

The *attack-traders* – as well as the *agarachaas* (women who went with enemy soldiers), the *stragglers* (those who follow the army from camp to camp), and the prostitutes – are all mentioned on the quiet, so to speak, but the emphasis with which this is done is an example of the social acceptance in women's literature of their roles in a war in which survival is the most important goal. The majority of the female authors pragmatically see these means of survival as acceptable in war.

Hence, one can maintain that, although the image of women in nearly all the texts is determined by wives and mothers who only want to survive the war, the image of the militant woman is present as well. This image remains peripheral, only partly open, yet points at possible, imminent changes in gender relations.³² In the texts of the female writers from inside Biafra, gender relations consist mainly of husbands and wives who strive for harmony, love,

³² One example is the preference of female protagonists for masculine or military-like clothing. See, for instance, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, "The War's Untold Story," in Adimora-Ezeigbo, *Echos in the Mind* (Lagos: Foundation, 1994): 81; Obong, *Garden House*, 153.

and cooperation to such an extent that it seems almost utopian.³³ Still, here too – as a warning, so to speak, to the men not to let it come to that – there is talk of an imminent "women's war," an allusion to the famous *Aba Women's War* that took place in colonial Nigeria,³⁴ meaning for men a total reverse of the gender roles.³⁵ Whether the displayed militancy in the living together of couples is muted or in the open, both are an urgent appeal for the renewal of gender relations.

Contrary to this, in the texts of almost all the authors from outside Biafra a nearly permanent gender war takes place. If at all, harmony between the sexes is seen to be possible only in a distant, much better future.³⁶ Marriages are characterized by fighting, physical violence, and rape. The female protagonists are exposed to sexual and domestic violence to such a degree that it seems as if these writers from outside the actual battle zone mirror the war in their fictional battle of the sexes. In Anne Amu-Giwa's novel *Sade*, the protagonist is trapped in the war zone together with her unloved husband, who forces his marital rights upon her. Amu-Giwa and others use the civil war as a suitable backdrop for the marital mess that sometimes ends in a kind of a 'men-free zone' or in a utopia peopled only with 'new men and women'. In Eno Obong's novel *Garden House*, for instance, the leader and idolized hero of the 'new nation' is a former soldier who was emasculated during the massacres that preceded the civil war. He later puts all his energies into building the new "Abuja," inhabited only by war orphans, formerly abused women, and 'new men' complying to new rules. The female protagonists in these texts are on their way to redefine their identity and confidence, if necessary without a husband or the presence of a man, like the protagonist in *Sade*.

³³ See, for example, Ifeoma Okoye, *The Lost Years* (unpublished manuscript); Flora Nwapa, "Wives at War," in Nwapa, *Wives at War and Other Stories* (Enugu: Tana, 1980) and Orji, *Teenager at War*. Mutual love and understanding between the spouses is emphasized also in texts where the male spouse is absent, dearly missed by his wife. See e.g. Uche Nwabunike, *Forever She Cried* (Ibadan: Kraft, 1999).

³⁴ See Judith van Allen, "Aba Riots or Women's War?" in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*, ed. Nancy J. Hafkin & Edna G. Bay (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 1976): 59–85.

³⁵ See, for example, Egejuru, *The Seed Yams*, 219–27; and Nwapa, "Wives at War," 13–14.

³⁶ See, for example, Anne Giwa-Amu, *Sade* (London: ACE, 1996); Eno Obong, *Garden House* (Ibadan: New Horn, 1988); Emecheta, *Destination Biafra*.

Conclusion: From Civil War to gender war

By representing the war with its atrocities committed on both sides in a careful and responsible way, some women writers ruffle the surface of the bulk of the dominant war discourse, which mostly blames others for the calamities. The hesitation on the part of these writers – evident in their introductory texts – suggests, however, that they are conscious of their intrusion into the male war discourse. By presenting 'reversed' gendered spaces and gender roles, the women writers introduce a new element into the existing gender relations: namely, their negotiability. Their subversiveness expresses itself in the way they present gender relations and roles as changeable. They have used the experience of the civil war to open the front of the gender war. What is interesting is the fact that women writers from the two sides of the divide deal with their topic in different ways – either through strained, somewhat utopian harmony or in terms of an open and ceaseless battle between the sexes.

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MARTINA KOPF

Writing Sexual Violence
Words and Silences
in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*

I am afraid to listen to Grandmother, to discover her places of silence. I know there is a wide lake in her memory, a lake in which ripples grow to the edges of the sky, a lake in which all our grief is hidden. Her word rests at the bottom of silent lakes but she will find the word and give it to me.¹

IN THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS of Yvonne Vera's novel *Under the Tongue* I focus on its depiction of childhood sexual abuse and some general aspects of the narrative representation of traumatic experiences. Based on the idea that literature as a creative medium offers particular possibilities for communicating and transforming mechanisms of psychic trauma as they are frequently experienced by victims of violence, I explore the progression of the novel as a type of trauma narrative. The first part of the essay dwells upon the concept of trauma and the antagonism between traumatic experience and narrative memory as a subject of psychoanalytical research. In a second step, I discuss the role literary fiction can play as a bridge between

¹ Yvonne Vera, *Under the Tongue* (1996; Harare: Baobab & Claremont, S.A.: David Philip, 1997): 70. All page references in the text are to the second edition.

individual experience and collective memory. In the third part, I present a reading of *Under the Tongue*, focusing on the novel's ability to perform the effects of trauma by mimetically reproducing them, and the author's ability to transform these effects into narrative processes by making creative literary choices.

The problem of how to integrate traumatic experiences into individual as well as collective memories constitutes a challenge to various fields of contemporary practice and research. The concept of psychic trauma dates back to the origins of psychoanalysis, when Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, and other analysts became aware of the relationship between neurosis and traumatic experiences.² Trauma's manifestations, definition, and treatment have remained a crucial concern of psychoanalytical theory ever since. The theories of trauma have spread into other disciplines such as history and cultural theory, where they serve as interpretative patterns for mental, social, and cultural processes linked with the experience of violence and loss on a collective level.

When talking about the relationship between literature and trauma, we have to understand how trauma works. There is a huge corpus of research on the characteristics and effects of trauma. I will depict only one small aspect here, which is nonetheless a crucial one: trauma's devastating and disintegrative effects on language and communication. It should be kept in mind that I am speaking of trauma as rooted in what the psychoanalyst Frederick calls the "interhuman infliction of significant and avoidable pain and suffering."³ In other words, I am speaking of trauma that bears human, in this case sexual, violence at its heart.

Trauma's resistance to narrative representation

One of the main characteristics of trauma is that it resists narrative representation, revealing itself more in a language of symptoms than in a language of words and sentences. Speaking about trauma, we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of speaking about the unspeakable, looking for words to describe what originally surpassed the signifying power of words. In his essay

² See the first chapter of Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 7–32.

³ Quoted in Irene Kacandes, "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrude Stein's *A Jewish Mother*," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe & Leo Spitzer (Hanover NH: Dartmouth College, 1999): 57.

"Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma,"⁴ Eric van Alphen shows that the term 'traumatic experience' already proves inadequate. Experience is a discursive process and demands subjectivity. Traumatizing violence, however, cannot be 'experienced' in this sense, and therefore cannot be integrated into narrative memory, as it puts the self and its usual functions out of order. "Trauma is fundamentally (and not gradually) different from memory because 'it becomes dissociated from conscious awareness and voluntary control'."⁵ According to Werner Bohleber's description of the history of trauma theory, we can filter two basic factors from the numerous definitions of trauma present in psychoanalytical thinking today: 1. Traumatic experience always constitutes 'too much' for the self to contain.⁶ 2. Trauma mutes the interior 'Other,' the interior good object that mediates between the self and the outside world and makes confidence and communication possible.⁷ This overwhelming 'too much' and the loss of the empathic interior 'Other' destroy the ability to narrate the trauma.

To understand narratives of traumatic experiences we must recognize the absence of language and meaning such experiences originally provoke. This absence signifies a violent interruption of the interhuman flow of communication, a destruction of one's basic confidence in the common ground of a symbolic order that is at the forefront of any kind of communication. Any kind of traumatizing violence causes what I shall call a soul death.

When we talk about childhood sexual abuse, we do not always bear this failure of language in mind. Usually we associate such abuse only with its sexual dimension, perceiving only the physical, visible part of the drama. The part that is more difficult to discern – particularly owing to the extreme secrecy that usually accompanies family violence – is the violent assault on a child's mental and spiritual growth in the world. This assault is particularly serious, as it attacks a symbolic order still under construction, a still flexible and fluid and as such specifically vulnerable system of values and meanings. Furthermore, the perpetrator usually burdens the child with the obligation to keep the secret. The implicit impossibility of telling is crossed with the explicit prohibition to tell. This conjunction leads the victim into an involuntary complicity with the perpetrator and overlaps hurt and confusion with feelings of shame and guilt. Since traumatized children – like all trauma victims – do

⁴ Eric van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory, and Trauma," in *Acts of Memory*, ed. Bal, Crewe & Spitzer, 24–38.

⁵ van Alphen, "Symptoms of Discursivity," 36.

⁶ Werner Bohleber, "Die Entwicklung der Traumatheorie in der Psychoanalyse," *Psyche* 54 (September–October 2000): 798.

⁷ Bohleber, "Die Entwicklung der Traumatheorie in der Psychoanalyse," 821–23.

not have access to language as an adequate means to transmit what has been done to them, they will experience a loss of confidence in language itself as an integrating system of signs and signification. This loss of confidence occurs at a stage where the children are still growing into the system of language and signification.

In order to now build a bridge from trauma to literary theory, I will refer back to another crucial aspect of trauma. As I have pointed out, trauma resists narrative representation. At the same time, it urges its own narration. In the form of traumatic memory, such narration is characterized by repetition: the impulse to re-live an act again and again. Traumatic memory adheres to the unconscious and the body from where it unfolds its catalogue of constrictive and intrusive symptoms, grouped under the medical diagnosis Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: flashbacks, re-enactments, amnesia, dissociation, displacement, numbing, etc. The 'I' that has been overwhelmed by 'too much' fear and agitation at one time will remain prey to the repetitive re-enactment of this experience for as long as the subject is unable to find a way to contain that experience. Finding the way to contain it seems to lead through the process of narration.

In her article "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work," Irene Kacandes integrates a model originally developed in trauma therapy into her reading of the short novel *A Jewish Mother* by Gertrud Kolmar. Kacandes presents both her reading and Kolmar's writing as performances of "narrative witnessing," deriving the term "from what medical experts have discovered about the unique role of narrative and witnessing in the treatment of psychic trauma victims." She further summarizes this role as follows:

as Pierre Janet and numerous researchers and psychoanalysts after him have observed, the relief of traumatic symptoms [...] seems to require the creation of some kind of coherent narrative about the event or events that inflicted the trauma; this process is sometimes referred to as the translation of traumatic memory into narrative memory.⁸

It is necessary for the subject to engage in a certain kind of memory work in order to produce a healing narrative.

Yet simply expressing an experience does not automatically lead to coping with that experience. Especially when sexual violence is concerned, one is easily confronted with the presumption that simply 'speaking out' about what happened will resolve its implications. On the one hand, this presumption turns a blind eye to the diversity of possible reactions, shaped by interests not necessarily supportive. On the other hand, 'speaking out' can lead to another

⁸ Kacandes, "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work," 55.

dead end, when the person who speaks can do so only by following predetermined speech-patterns, effecting a further dissociation through assimilation to preexisting stereotypes. Their words will not transmit personal and contradictory experiences, but will instead freeze into a confession and can easily be dismissed as such.⁹

The production of a bona fide healing narrative is a more complicated and complex process than merely "speaking out." Knowledge gained from psychoanalytical work with trauma victims suggests "that to effect healing, a circuit of communication must come into being, the components of which are an enunciator [...], a story [...], and an enabler for that story." Listening and witnessing play a crucial role in the process of translating into narrative memory what is remembered as wordless hurt, confusion, and numbness. "In the absence of a sympathetic listener with whom to construct the story, the trauma continues to surface as symptom-waiting-to-be-narrated."¹⁰ The process of narrating itself is an act of creation and re-creation.

This need for a listener leads me to literature as potential medium of trauma narration. Like Kacandes, I want to suggest that we can transfer aspects of the basic pattern psychoanalysts have developed by and for memory work with individual trauma victims to the level of collective memory and collective cultural production. Because, as Kalí Tal points out in her reading of literatures of trauma, "on a social as well as an individual psychological level, the penalty for repression is repetition."¹¹ My questions would then be as follows: What can the writing and reading of literature contribute in the effort to bring the circuit of trauma communication onto a collective level? In what ways can creative writing and reading – with their rich potential of imagery, wording, and voicing – reconnect a flow of interpersonal communication that has been violently interrupted by the 'impossibility of telling'? What does *Under the Tongue* tell us about these questions? I now want to present my reading of the novel as part of a process of narrative witnessing.

Narrative witnessing in *Under the Tongue*

Yvonne Vera's novel contains a succession of individual chapters that alternate in a constant rhythm between first- and third-person narration. The first-

⁹ See Hanna Kiper, *Sexueller Mißbrauch im Diskurs: Eine Reflexion literarischer und pädagogischer Traditionen* (Weinheim: Deutscher Studienverlag, 1994): 215–17.

¹⁰ Kacandes, "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work," 56.

¹¹ Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 7.

person passages lead us into the “hidden places” of Zhizha, the young protagonist. Close to her narration, an auctorial voice unfolds a second narrative trail, following the story of Zhizha’s family: the origins of her father Muro-yiwa, his path to the township of Umtali where he met Zhizha’s mother, Runyararo, and where the three of them lived together. As we learn in the end, Zhizha was born ten years before the cease-fire. The third-person narration thus fills in the gaps of Zhizha’s narration; it accompanies and backs her and unravels her story from another angle. The auctorial voice mediates between Zhizha’s mental language and the reader, introducing a certain distance and adding an outside perspective to the interior drama we are led to witness.

Zhizha, the ‘I’ of the narration, presents herself as landscape, as an open territory. Her body language is translated into metaphors of water and stone. Her body/soul/spirit landscape is mainly shaped by a river, her tongue, which hides beneath the rock her belly has turned into in fear and defense.

A tongue which no longer lives, no longer weeps. It is buried beneath rock.
My tongue is a river. I touch my tongue in search of the places of my
growing. My tongue is heavy with sleep. I know a stone is buried in my
mouth, carried under my tongue. My voice has forgotten me.¹²

With her tongue buried, this landscape seems to be an open territory for the uncontrolled coming and going of voices and memories. Zhizha’s ‘I’ moves to and fro in endless shiftings and displacements, the boundaries of her ‘self’ are indistinct and permeable. At the end of the narrative we learn that she had been literally split open by her father, who ‘entered into her’ while she slept.¹³

In the opening scene, Zhizha does not explicitly say that her father raped her. Her father and the act of sexual abuse are metaphorically represented by her father’s voice, which enters Zhizha’s sleep and haunts her, making her own voice hide, disappear.¹⁴ Right from the beginning, Zhizha’s first-person narrative is abundant with images that show her tongue as an immobile, frozen, and alienated part of her body. But only several chapters later and

¹² Vera, *Under the Tongue*, 1.

¹³ *Under the Tongue*, 105–107.

¹⁴ Anne B. Dalton describes a similar narrative figure in her analysis of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: “Her [the author’s] use of the woman’s ear as the site of the attack is appropriate and evocative because the abused ear is parallel to the silenced mouth of the molested woman and what she cannot tell. Dr. Flint [the protagonist] has the power to speak, but the sexually abused woman cannot name what he is ‘speaking,’ although she desperately wants to reveal the trauma”; Dalton, “The Devil and the Virgin: Writing Sexual Abuse in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” in *Violence, Silence and Anger: Women’s Writing as Transgression*, ed. Deirdre Lashgari (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1995): 43.

from the outside perspective of the third-person narrative do we learn that what shows itself as metaphor also literally means that Zhizha does not speak, that she has been muted.

If her soul/body/spirit territory is marked by this forced splitting and opening, it nonetheless displays a willing openness to her grandmother’s voice and words. Grandmother’s voice, which Zhizha recalls and evokes inside her, does not enter or penetrate her. It “remembers” her, “embraces” her, “follows” her.¹⁵ These terms suggest that this other voice respects and tries to rebuild the boundaries of Zhizha’s self. The excessive appearance of voices makes us acknowledge right from the beginning that, whatever happened, it is significant on the level of language.

Let me now return to the question of the ways in which the novel and our reading may contribute to collective trauma work. I would like to stress two important aspects: *performance* and *transformation*; both the means and effects of creative writing.

To investigate the performative qualities of the text I recur to one of Kacandes’ statements:

we can think about narratives ‘of’ trauma, but also about narratives ‘as’ trauma. That is to say, literary texts can be about trauma, in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully witness their trauma. But texts can also ‘perform’ trauma, in the sense that they can ‘fail’ to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.¹⁶

My approach is slightly different, insofar as I suggest that through the means of her narrative techniques and composition, Vera relates and simultaneously performs not trauma itself, but how trauma works. Equally, the novel does not fail to tell, but *performs the failure to tell*. Let me demonstrate this proposal by going into one detail of the text.

Judith Herman stresses the fact that chronically traumatized people, as most victims of family violence usually are, are often described as passive or helpless. The people in their environment tend to perceive them as apathetic, quiet, or depressed when in fact they live through vivid and multilayered interior struggles.¹⁷ Zhizha, too, seems mute and expressionless. Since the narration unfolds from an inside perspective, however, leading us into Zhizha’s mental language and her ways of perceiving, we as readers become

¹⁵ Vera, *Under the Tongue*, 1–2.

¹⁶ Kacandes, “Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work,” 56.

¹⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 90–91.

witnesses to an eloquent muteness – a muteness that in fact is a long and passionate struggle for words, a struggle to name what happened and is still happening. It is a struggle to remember and to tell what made and makes her mute.

Together with Zhizha we find ourselves in a dreamlike state, where we cannot tell imagination from reality, present from past, sleeping from being awake. While reading what happens in her mind, we feel confusion and the urge to find meaning for this confusion. Zhizha searches for a word that can make remembrance, mourning, and living flow again. We follow Zhizha's repeated efforts to make the narration flow and we meet the obstacles and ruptures that incessantly put a halt to the flow, so that another trail must be explored. While moving in Zhizha's body/soul/spirit landscape, we get the feeling of 'flowing on the spot'. Maybe at some points in our wandering we feel impatient, have an urge to break through, to finally find a way out of this confusing landscape. Maybe we do not always understand the signification of the images, sounds, and rhythms we encounter. Maybe we cannot explain this ever-threatening deadly silence, but only acknowledge its persistence. However, whatever irritations we might feel while reading, they are part of the performance of how trauma works.

Reading the text as mimesis of trauma and paying attention to the way it elides, repeats, and fragments components of the story leads me to the chapter where we finally witness Zhizha's reconstruction of the abuse.¹⁸ Just as in Vera's preceding novel, *Without a Name*, the act of sexual violence is never explicitly named in the narrative; words like 'rape', 'sexual abuse', or 'incest' that would name the deed are never spelled out. It is obvious that Zhizha herself does not have any such term at her disposal. It would have to come from outside, but her grandmother and her mother also do not seem to have words for 'it'.

The impression of 'flowing on the spot' that Zhizha's mental language creates is repeated in the circular structure of her mental narrative: the chapter where we encounter her hidden story for the last time leads us back to its beginning. We leave her right in her remembrance of the incest, which she narrates – with one brief exception – in present, not in past time, just as if it is still happening, as if there is no end to it and no temporal progression from it. This chapter stands apart from the rest of the narrative. It even differs from the preceding text: short sentences, single words, empty spaces between single lines, lacunae. Paragraphs of prose narrative are interrupted and split by paragraphs that consist of torn sentences, short and sharp fragments, flash-backs.

¹⁸ Vera, *Under the Tongue*, 103–10.

He put mucus here, and blood ...
Quiet.
He put mucus between my legs ...
Quiet.
Am I going to die?
Quiet.
He broke my stomach ...

He put blood between my legs.

Fragmented passages like this alternate with moments of coherent narration:

It is like this. He is breathing hard spreading a humid air around my face. A ringing awakening and something enters through my ears, ominous, and it will not depart. It spreads its darkness through me, past me, feigning friendship. [...] He enters through my crying saying very softly sh sh sh. [...] He enters into me, through me.¹⁹

The whole chapter seems to perform the struggle of translating traumatic into narrative memory. And this performance demands creative skill: the skill to not only talk about incest and the effects and symptoms it produces, but to reproduce these effects on a narrative level.

"The balance between beauty and pain"

The second aspect I mentioned and want to depict now is the transformative quality of the text. It is true that it can be read as "a successful representation of trauma."²⁰ At the same time it is of undeniable beauty. This paradoxical simultaneousness, this "balance between beauty and pain"²¹ is not self-evident, in fact it should irritate us. To achieve it the author has to imagine the trauma narrative she is going to tell in a way that fundamentally transforms it. Let me demonstrate this assumption and once again return to the novel's use of voices and the motive of listening.

In her analysis, Anne Dalton stresses the fact that "contemporary theorists on child abuse indicate that molesters consciously choose victims who they feel have the least power to tell."²² This characterization proves true for

¹⁹ Vera, *Under the Tongue*, 107.

²⁰ Kacandes, "Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work," 55.

²¹ Yvonne Vera, in her keynote speech at the conference "Versions & Subversions" (Humboldt University of Berlin, 1 May 2002).

²² Dalton, "The Devil and the Virgin," 50.

Zhizha. Yet the narrative composition subverts this powerlessness and makes Zhizha's muteness the driving force for a powerful performance of female storytelling.

Female storytelling is given expression through Zhizha's grandmother, whose shaping voice is predominant throughout the narrative. Zhizha is an intense and imaginative listener to her grandmother's own hidden story. In a mutual process of giving and taking words from each other Zhizha brings forth her grandmother's power to tell and grows to 'inherit' her voice and words.

Once Zhizha's active witnessing has enabled her grandmother to transmit her own story of loss and hurt, which she had been forced to bury a long time ago, a new flow of remembrance is set into motion. This flow leads Zhizha to rebuild an interior image of her mother as the one who taught her to spell.

Mother calls to me in a voice just like mine, she grows from inside of me [...]. I change into me, and I say a e i o u. I remember all my letters. I tell my mother and she repeats after me and I laugh then I repeat after mother who repeats after me and I after her ... I have turned into mother, and she laughs, because she has become me. The letters flow from me to mother. My mother's voice is resonant and searching. She says we live with our voices rich with remembrance. We live with words.²³

This passage may be one of the most beautiful parts of the book: mother and daughter in front of a mirror, repeating after one another, letting speech and transmission joyously flow between each other in an endless game of shifts and exchanges.

Finally, the third-person narrator strengthens Zhizha's narration. She shows herself to be a sympathetic listener to the hidden voice of a girl who grows into too much "avoidable and significant pain and suffering." The narrator empowers Zhizha's voice and other hidden voices who have similar stories to tell by writing what she witnesses and communicating it to an outside public. This narration leads us back to the collective level, where empowerment is reenacted with each sympathetic reading of the story.

With the help of trauma theory I have both attempted to depict some of the paradoxes encountered by creative writing about sexual violence as well as to demonstrate the ways in which Vera integrates these paradoxes into the narrative composition of *Under the Tongue*. While telling the story of a sexually abused girl, the novel simultaneously performs narrative failure and the impossibility of telling. At the same time, the novel unfolds complex processes of witnessing, listening, and remembering in which we as readers actively

²³ Vera, *Under the Tongue*, 81–82.

participate. Apart from their function of allowing suppressed memories to flow again, these mutual processes of telling and listening also demonstrate the power and beauty of transmission itself.²⁴ By re-creating these flows of transmission on a narrative level, Vera transforms the isolating, stumbling, and hardly understandable language of traumatic memory into the strength of narrative memory that can be shared.

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²⁴ See also Minh-ha's concept of storytelling where she says: "What is transmitted from generation to generation is not only the stories, but the very power of transmission." Trinh Minh-ha, "Grandma's Story," in *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989): 134.

LUCY VALERIE GRAHAM

Reading the Unspeakable Rape in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace**

Introduction

IN J.M. COETZEE'S NOVEL *DISGRACE*, the protagonist's daughter, Lucy, is gang-raped by three men on her smallholding in the Eastern Cape, but she chooses to say nothing about what happened to her. Reflecting on the triumph of the intruders, her father, David Lurie speculates: "It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket."¹ This stifling of rape narrative is a feature of the entire novel. The central incidents in both narrative settings of *Disgrace* are acts of sexual violation, but notably, in each case the experience of the violated body is absent, hidden from the reader. Although Lurie acknowledges that his sexual violation of a student, Melanie Isaacs, was 'undesired' by her, he maintains it was "[n]ot rape, not quite that" (25). During the disciplinary hearing that

* Previously published in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29.2 (2003) [<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/carfax/03057070.html>]. Reproduced by permission.

¹ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999): 110. Further page references are in the main text.

ensues, Melanie's account never reaches the reader, and Lurie, who refuses to defend himself, is accused of being "fundamentally evasive" (50).

In the wake of the farm-attack, Lucy asks Lurie to tell only his story: "I tell what happened to me" (99). The irony is that *she does not tell*, she remains resolutely silent about her experience. Until she mentions having had tests, the inference that a rape has occurred is Lurie's. He tells Bev Shaw that he is concerned for Lucy, about the risk of pregnancy, and of HIV, but in response he is told to ask Lucy himself (107). An account of rape is completely elided in Lucy's report to the police. Lurie pleads with his daughter to leave the Eastern Cape, or to tell the police, but she insists: "*You don't know what happened*" (134). Bev Shaw reiterates Lucy's message: "But you weren't there, David. She told me" (140). When Lurie confronts the word they have avoided, Lucy is not direct: "I think they do rape" (158).

The second part of *Rape and Representation*, edited by Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver, focuses on 'The Rhetoric of Elision' in a collection of essays which examine how rape may be read in its absence. The editors correctly propose that reading sexual violence requires "listening not only to who speaks and in what circumstances, but who does *not* speak and why."² Higgins and Silver concede that elision of the scene of violence in texts about rape both emphasizes the violence and suggests the possibility of making it visible, but these critics propose that there are differences between male and female scriptings of rape, and that the omission of the rape scene in male-authored texts could expose "the ambivalence of the male author caught in representations of masculinity and subjectivity he may question but that he ultimately leaves in place."³ I intend to demonstrate that Coetzee both presupposes and doubles back on such 'ambivalence'. As well as having relevance within the South African context, such reticence is self-reflexive, and thus not easily resolved, leaving a certain amount of responsibility with the reader.

Reading past 'the peril'

While the commercial (and perhaps literary) success of Coetzee's latest novel may be attributed to international appetites for representations of white women under threat of rape by black men, I would argue that in *Disgrace* Coetzee self-consciously performs a subversion of such 'black peril' narratives by simultaneously scripting what Plaatje referred to as 'the white peril,' the hidden sexual exploitation of black women by white men that has existed

² Lynn Higgins & Brenda Silver, *Rape and Representation* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991): 3.

³ Higgins & Silver, *Rape and Representation*, 6.

for centuries.⁴ 'Black peril' imagery has been a feature of racist political discourse throughout the twentieth century, but the subversive status of 'white peril' literature is confirmed by the attitude of apartheid censors. In 1977 Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country* was placed under scrutiny, partly for representing an apparent rape of a white woman by a black farm-worker *as well as* the white farmer's coercion of a black female servant.⁵ Records of the former Board of Censors also reveal that in 1962 Daphne Rooke's *The Greyling* was banned in South Africa, as the novel portrays the ways in which white men abused certain women who were considered inferior in terms of race and class.⁶

In *Disgrace*, Lurie translates Melanie's name as "the dark one" (18), and Lucy's name has associations with light. Playing on tropes of darkness and light, the names of the two women expose 'black peril' stereotypes and the residual threat of the 'white peril' that prevailed under colonialism and apartheid. Lurie has a history of desiring 'exotic' women, and assumes he has the right to purchase or possess their bodies without being responsible for them or respecting the lives they live. As Plaatje observed, many white men in South Africa exploited 'coloured concubines' without offering the women long-term security, or caring whether or not they became pregnant.⁷

Rather than confirming 'black peril' typecasts, Lucy's name reveals that these have been based on 'upholding' the 'purity' of white women. The sexual violation of Lucy further highlights a history tainted by racial injustice, by possession and dispossession, where, as Dorothy Driver has pointed out, white women have been 'signs' of that which was not exchanged between men in different racial groups.⁸ In David Lurie's opinion, "a history of wrong" (156) was speaking through Lucy's rapists. At the same time, Coetzee demonstrates very clearly that Lurie is blind to the history of his own actions, and during the disciplinary hearing in *Disgrace* Farodia Rassool comments on Lurie's refusal to acknowledge "the long history of exploitation of which [his treatment of Melanie] is a part" (53).

⁴ Sol T. Plaatje, *The Mote and the Beam* (New York: Youngs, 1921): 283.

⁵ Peter MacDonald, "Not Undesirable: How J.M. Coetzee escaped the censor," *TLS* (19 May 2000): 14–15.

⁶ State Archives, Cape Town, BCS 26963.

⁷ Plaatje, *The Mote and the Beam*, 277.

⁸ Dorothy Driver, "'Woman as sign' in the South African Colonial Enterprise," *Journal of Literary Studies* 4.1 (March 1988): 16.

If, as Elizabeth Lowry observes,⁹ *Disgrace* is “half campus novel, half anti-pastoral,” then two rapes that take place in the novel prompt an examination of the power dynamics in each setting, and in the respective literary modes. Lurie’s misuse of Melanie exposes power operating at the level of gender and at an institutional level. Rassool’s comment at the disciplinary hearing could refer to a history where white men have sexually exploited non-white women, and it could also point to abuses of power in the university that are as old as the academic profession. Immersed in a falsifying Romantic tradition, David speculates that “beauty does not belong to itself” (16), and thus justifies his underlying assumption, as Melanie’s educator, that she is somehow his property. This is revealed when he watches her in a play, claiming her achievements as his own: “When they laugh at Melanie’s lines he cannot resist a flush of pride. Mine! He would like to say to them [...] as if she were his daughter” (191).

By exposing these structures of power, Coetzee rewrites versions of the college novel, a genre that often masks the inequalities, gender harassment, and incidents of rape reported in campus life. The events that take place between David and Melanie in *Disgrace* also invite consideration of David Mamet’s play *Oleanna*, which dramatizes the vicissitudes of sexual harassment in the university environment. In *Oleanna*, however, the student who turns on her professor and accuses him of sexual harassment develops a shrill voice and strong opinions, whereas Melanie’s words in *Disgrace* are few. Although the female student in *Oleanna* is set up as possibly provoking the violence inflicted on her, in *Disgrace* there is a subtle critique of Mamet’s play, articulated, significantly, via Melanie’s script in a theatrical production: “My gats, why must everything always be my fault?” (24).

Sadly, Melanie’s position in *Disgrace* is not an uncommon one in contemporary South Africa. A South African newspaper recently reported that a deputy principal had impregnated twenty girls at his school, and that an educator had raped a fourteen-year-old schoolgirl twice in three months and had infected her with HIV.¹⁰ The girl said that after the second rape her teacher told her he was HIV positive. Lurie’s relationship with Melanie in *Disgrace* is depicted as a betrayal of ethical responsibility, since he violates her and will not take responsibility for her as an embodied Other. Although Lurie protests to the contrary, the act that he commits is rape: it is ‘undesired’ by the girl and involves abuse of her self. In an analysis of embodiment within a discourse of

⁹ Elizabeth Lowry, “Like a Dog,” review of *Disgrace*, *London Review of Books* (14 October 1999): 12.

¹⁰ East Cape News, in *The Daily Dispatch* (10 October 2001), online: <http://www.dispatch.co.za/2001/10/10/easterncape/ABUSING.htm>

ethics, Barry Smart emphasizes that the physical consequences of sexual relationships, such as pregnancies, abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases including AIDS, demand consideration of the body that “prioritises moral issues and encompasses relations of self and other.”¹¹ In reading Coetzee’s novel, one may contrast Lurie’s concern for Lucy’s body after she is raped (he wants her to have HIV and pregnancy tests) to his lack of concern for Melanie Isaacs, upon whom he forces himself after he has had sex with Soraya, a prostitute.

Coetzee’s choice of the rural Eastern Cape as a setting for the rape of Lurie’s daughter by three black men underscores complex historical connections between race, gender, and land. In *The Mote and the Beam* (1921), Sol Plaatje noted that the British Colonial Secretary, Lord Harcourt, justified the Natives Land Act as a means of stopping the ‘black peril’ cases.¹² The farm space is a violently contested boundary in post-apartheid South Africa and, as Coetzee demonstrates in *White Writing*, the South African pastoral, which presents a vision of the ‘husband–farmer’ as custodian of the feminine earth, has been discursively implicated in the colonial appropriation of territory.¹³ In *Disgrace*, however, the anti-pastoral mode breaks with colonial mappings of the female body and land, depicting instead feudal systems of claiming and reclaiming where there is contempt for women as owners of property and land.

A worthwhile comparison here would be with Eleanor of Aquitaine, who apparently feared being ‘rapt’ by a ‘vassal’ who might, through the act, gain title to her land and assets.¹⁴ After Lucy is raped by unnamed intruders, she is made a proposal of marriage by Petrus, the farm-worker who claims kinship with one of Lucy’s rapists, and offers to look after her in return for her land. In *the Heart of the Country*, Coetzee’s earlier anti-pastoral novel, also alludes to rape, and reveals gender oppression operating within the farm setting and in the pastoral genre, where we find women “imprisoned in the farmhouse, con-

¹¹ Barry Smart, “Facing the Body: Goffman, Levinas and the Subject of Ethics,” *Body and Society* 22.2 (June 1996), 75. The approach here counters Foucault’s claim that “[rape] may be treated as an act of violence [...] of the same type as that of punching someone in the face.” See Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture. Interviews and Other Writings*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (London: Routledge, 1988): 201–202. Although Foucault is trying to resist cultural definitions that invest sexualized meaning in certain parts of the body, his statement does not take into account the fact that sexually transmitted diseases (which may be fatal), as well as pregnancy, are high-risk factors for victims of sex crimes.

¹² Plaatje, *The Mote and the Beam*, 283.

¹³ J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1988).

¹⁴ Amy Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (New York: Random House, 1959): 4.

fined to the breast function.”¹⁵ *Disgrace* seems to suggest that female bodies may not fare better in the new order, as after Lucy is raped she becomes pregnant, gives up her land, and retreats into the house.

In “The Harms of Pornography,” Coetzee claims that colonial culture and processes of apartheid are deeply implicated in the escalation of sexual violence in the contemporary context:

[Colonialism] fractured the social and customary basis of legality, yet allowed some of the worst features of patriarchy to survive, including the treatment of unattached (unowned) women as fair game, huntable creatures.¹⁶

Disgrace points to a context where women are regarded as property, and are liable for protection only insofar as they belong to men. As a lesbian, Lucy would be regarded as ‘unowned’ and therefore ‘huntable’, and there is even a suggestion that her sexuality may have provoked her attackers.¹⁷

Lucy insists that in South Africa, “in this place, at this time,” the violation she has suffered cannot be a public matter, and her failure to report the crime to the authorities may represent, as Marais proposes, a rather extreme refusal to play a part in a history of oppression. This does not, however, explain the complete absence of her story in the narrative structure of *Disgrace*. Similarly, the reader never hears Melanie’s story, and the accounts of the two women are noteworthy lacunae in each narrative setting.

Is it possible to read the silence of the two rape victims in *Disgrace* outside of a phenomenon of historical silencing? Reporting in the aftermath of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Beth Goldblatt and Sheila Meintjes write that although there is a widespread belief that the TRC exposed South Africa’s brutal history, “violence against women is one of the hidden sides to the story of our past.”¹⁸ These lacunae in the archive, as Goldblatt and Meintjes maintain, have serious implications for attempts to understand South Africa’s history and for dealing with the country’s present.¹⁹ In spite of the TRC’s ‘women’s hearings’, there is no doubt that certain fragments of remembered history have had insignificant status in South Africa, that the inseparability of sexual and political violence was not addressed by the TRC,

¹⁵ Coetzee, *White Writing*, 9.

¹⁶ J.M. Coetzee, “The Harms of Pornography,” in *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996): 81–82.

¹⁷ Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 105.

¹⁸ Beth Goldblatt & Sheila Meintjes, “Dealing with the Aftermath: Sexual Violence and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *Agenda* 36 (1997): 7.

¹⁹ Goldblatt & Meintjes, “Dealing with the Aftermath,” 7.

and that the climate of public exposure and responsiveness during the hearings failed to create ‘a safe space’ for women. The Human Rights Watch report on rape and domestic violence in South Africa (1995) observed cases where women were targeted for rape as part of the political conflict,²⁰ but Jessie Duarte, a former activist, claims that many women felt they could not say they were raped, because “from the position of the people they worked with that was considered a weakness.”²¹

In a remarkable parallel with David Lurie’s attitude during his disciplinary hearing, Lucy in *Disgrace* insists that she has “the right not to be put on trial,”²² and in “The Harms of Pornography” Coetzee indicts a society where those who have suffered rape and sexual abuse may be perceived as ‘disgraced’:

The ambivalence of rape victims – particularly outside the West – about seeking redress from the law, and the surprising degree of suspicion or hostility with which the public, even in the West, treats such plaintiffs, indicates that in matters of honor archaic attitudes are far from dead [...] the system of justice of the modern state, based on notions of guilt and innocence has not entirely supplanted the tribunal of public opinion, based on notions of honor and shame.²³

When Lurie imagines Lucy’s story “like a stain [...] spreading across the district” (115), he is imagining the “tribunal of public opinion” that will pass judgment upon her, that will see her as tainted, disgraced. The dilemmas of Lucy and Melanie point to a context where victims are compelled to be silent, and thus collude with perpetrators. Lurie tells Melanie to return to her work, but she stares at him in shock: “You have cut me off from everyone, she seems to want to say. You have made me bear your secret” (34). Similarly, Lucy’s silence means that her rapists are “getting away with” their crime (158).

In canonical literary narratives of the West, rape is often depicted as ‘unspeakable’, as severed from articulation, and literary references to hidden rape stories have always brought into relief the complex relationship between literary silences and the aftermath of actual violation. Although Shakespeare’s Lucrece names the one who has raped her, her account does not save her from perceiving herself as “disgraced,” or from giving herself up to death. Philo-

²⁰ Binaifer Nowrojee & Bronwen Manby, *Violence against Women in South Africa: The State Response to Domestic Violence and Rape* (New York: Human Rights Watch/Africa and Human Rights Watch Women’s Project, 1995): 21.

²¹ Goldblatt & Meintjes, “Dealing with the Aftermath,” 11.

²² Coetzee, *Disgrace*, 133; emphasis added.

²³ Coetzee, “The Harms of Pornography,” 80 (my emphasis).

mela, in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, is raped and has her tongue cut out to prevent her from naming the crime and the perpetrator. She sews her account into a tapestry, thus making it possible for her sister to discover the rapist's identity. In the workings of art, Philomela can convey that which is 'unspeakable' in the realm of life. It is no accident that the names of Melanie and Lucy in *Disgrace* echo those of the two mythological rape victims, highlighting Western artistic traditions where rape has had a troubled relationship to representation.

The double bind: Rape, colonial culture and pornography

In "Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualizing Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa," Amina C. Mama points out that the colonial cultures which imposed themselves on the African continent were steeped in gender violence.²⁴ In my view, this is revealed, decisively, in Western attitudes to the representation of rape. Coetzee's analysis of censorship, *Giving Offense* (1996), contains the above-mentioned essay on "The Harms of Pornography," in which he observes that the portrayal of violence is "deeply anti-classical," as carnage and rape were typically kept behind the scenes in classical representations.²⁵ What Coetzee suggests here is that although rape was a common enough subject in classical art, the violence of rape was both obscured and legitimized by representations that depicted sexual violation in an aesthetic manner.²⁶

Remarking this feature in literature, Higgins and Silver urge readers to challenge conventions that represent rape as titillation or seduction, and that transform the violence of rape into an aesthetic encounter where the victim's beauty seals her fate:

The conventions at issue are no less than the Western lyric tradition and the quest for beauty, truth and knowledge associated with the 'Grecian Spirit' in Western art and philosophy.²⁷

Disappointingly, the majority of reviewers of *Disgrace* read in sympathy with Lurie, glossing his interaction with Melanie as a seduction, rather than a rape.

²⁴ Amina C. Mama, "Sheroes and Villains: Conceptualising Colonial and Contemporary Violence Against Women in Africa," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jacqueline Alexander & Chandra Mohanty (London: Routledge, 1997): 47–62.

²⁵ Coetzee, "The Harms of Pornography," 75.

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of rape in Western art, see: Diane Wolfthal, *Images of Rape: The Heroic Tradition and Its Alternatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000).

²⁷ Higgins & Silver, *Rape and Representation*, 4–5.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett writes that Lurie "seduces a young female student,"²⁸ and other reviewers represent his abuse of Melanie as an 'affair'.²⁹ Overlooking the violation entirely, Albert du Toit explains that the 'affair' between Lurie and Melanie "blossoms but soon sours."³⁰

In Shakespeare's "The Rape of Lucrece," the distraught Lucrece stands before a painting of the war that ensued after the rape (typically represented as an 'abduction' or 'elopement') of Helen of Troy. The encounter, framed within the literary text, is between the artwork and the viewer, between representation and the realm of life, and *Disgrace* stages this confrontation, also via rape narrative, in a remarkably similar way. After the farm attack, David finds a reproduction of Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women* in an art book in the Grahamstown library and asks: "What had all this attitudinizing to do with what he expected rape to be: the man lying on top of the woman and pushing himself into her?"

Thinking of Byron, who "pushed himself into" and possibly raped "legions of countesses and kitchenmaids," David speculates that from where Lucy stands, "Byron looks very old-fashioned indeed" (160). Here is a critique of the Romantic/humanist posturing that obscures, even justifies, forsaking ethical responsibility in the realm of life. And yet David, scholar of Romanticism, is guilty of 'attitudinizing' when he excuses his violation of Melanie Isaacs as an act motivated by Eros (52), or inspired by "Aphrodite, goddess of the foaming waves" (25). Coetzee's novel thus assesses the disjunction between allegiance to an ideology of aesthetics and allegiance to the ethical, revealing Western artistic traditions that may condone unethical acts.

The masking or elision of violence in the classical tradition is quite different from humanitarian attitudes that developed in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment humanitarianism, based on notions of sensibility and sympathy, typically sought to expose atrocities, but ran the risk of turning violence into a pornographic spectacle which threatened to implicate the viewer. Hence the double bind, and what Terry Eagleton, analyzing Richardson's *Clarissa*, regards as the "unrepresentability" of rape.³¹ Examining the history

²⁸ Lucy Hughes-Hallett, "Coetzee triumphs in description of fall from grace," *Saturday Argus: The Good Weekend* (7 August, 1999): 5.

²⁹ Michael Morris, "Coetzee thinks publicly about new SA," *Cape Argus* (10 August 1999): 16; Toni Younghusband, "Review of *Disgrace*," *Femina* (September 1999): 148; Max Du Preez "It's a disgrace, but the truth is [...]," *The Star* (27 January 2000): 18.

³⁰ Albert du Toit, "Finely tuned novel set in new SA," *Eastern Province Herald* (11 August 1999): 4.

³¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (London: Blackwell, 1989).

of violence as spectacle, Karen Halttunen proposes that the solitary act of novel reading, which developed alongside humanitarian attitudes of sensibility in the eighteenth century, permits the reader to enter a fictive "cultural underground of the illicit and the forbidden," where an encounter with darker, perhaps more violent fantasies is permitted.³² As Halttunen suggests, sensationalist violence, which places the spectator as voyeur, makes a peculiar and paradoxical call upon him/her to identify with the perpetrator.

Coetzee seems to be aware of this dilemma, and there is evidence, in his early fiction (*Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*), and in his critical work of the mid-1990s, that he has given serious consideration to strategies of representing sexual violence. In "The Harms of Pornography," he engages with the feminist campaign against pornography, particularly with views expressed by Catherine MacKinnon. Other chapters in this collection on censorship had found their way into publication between 1988 and 1993, but the essay on MacKinnon is a new contribution, suggesting that Coetzee was pre-occupied with the issues raised in "The Harms of Pornography" during the period when *Disgrace* was in the offing. As an alternative to MacKinnon's line of argument, which insists on the 'delegitimization' of representations of sexual violence, Coetzee offers the possibility of "a male writer-pornographer" who poses the following question:

If I were to write an account of power and desire that, unlike yours, does not close the book on desire [...] if this hypothetical account were further to be offered, not in the discursive terms of 'theory,' but in the form of a representation [...] if this representation were to share a thematics with pornography (including perhaps torture, abasement, acts of cruelty) [...] if this project were carried through and offered to the world, what would protect it from suffering the same fate – 'delegitimization' – as any work of pornography, except perhaps its *seriousness* (if that were recognized), as a philosophical project?³³

Coetzee points to the moral blindness of an industry that profits from exploiting women but argues that neither censorship nor the 'delegitimization' of certain representations would stop serious writers from dramatizing darker aspects of experience. For a particular type of artist, he explains here, "seriousness is [...] an imperative uniting the aesthetic and the ethical."³⁴

³² Karen Halttunen, "Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture," *American Historical Review* 100.2 (1995): 334.

³³ Coetzee, "The Harms of Pornography," 72.

³⁴ "The Harms of Pornography," 73–74.

In *Disgrace*, Lucy is adamant that what happened is "[hers] alone" (133), insisting that Lurie – and, by default, the reader – was not there. But if female silence in Coetzee's previous novels could be linked to "the power to withhold,"³⁵ Lucy's refusal to speak about her experience certainly does not empower her, and means that her story belongs to her rapists: "not her story to spread but theirs: they are its owners" (115).

Whereas the rape of Lucy remains off-stage, Melanie's violation is 'luridly' represented via Lurie, the intruder who 'thrusts' himself into her apartment and into her body. The narrative point of view and aspects of description echo the father-daughter rape in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, where the incident is distanced by way of a third-person narrative voice, focalized through the father-rapist, and the victim's experience is blanked out. In *The Bluest Eye* the victim faints, and in *Disgrace* Melanie 'averts' herself, as if she had "decided to [...] die within herself for the duration" (25). Cholly in Morrison's novel nibbles his daughter's foot before he rapes her unresponsive body.³⁶ Similarly, Lurie kisses Melanie's feet before indulging in an act he describes as "not quite" rape. In *Disgrace*, perspective is destabilized in this paragraph beginning "Not rape, not quite that" (16) as the reader is plunged into an ambiguous episode where the distance between narrative voice and focalizer collapses. Melanie says "no" when Lurie grabs her, she does struggle against him as he picks her up and carries her to the bedroom, and there is an acknowledgement that, for her, their intercourse is "undesired to the core" (25). But what, some might ask, was she doing in his home drinking alcohol before this incident? Why, if she was raped, does she later seek shelter at his home, and why does she sleep with him again? Since we have no access to Melanie's thoughts, we cannot know. Deliberately it seems, Coetzee has invited a trial of sorts, where the reader is called upon to position herself/himself and assess whether or not this encounter qualifies as a rape comparable to the rape of Lucy.

On the one hand, the stories of Melanie and Lucy are not offered to the reader, and must remain '[theirs] alone.' At the same time, to relegate rape to a realm outside discourse and beyond the imagination of a male author – or of the person who reads *Disgrace* – would be to contribute to a much wider and more problematic phenomenon of silencing. Although Lucy's story is hidden from Lurie and from the reader, Lurie is haunted by possibilities, and mentally plays out the horrific scenario:

³⁵ J.M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 122.

³⁶ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (1970; London: Vintage, 1999), 128.

[...] the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* They said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs? Then let us show you dogs!* [...] he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. *The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman?* (160)

Through this imaginary 'reading', the absent scene of violence is made visible; but Lurie's question suggests that ethical responsiveness depends on experiencing the narrative differently, on 'giving up' the viewpoint of perpetrator or voyeur, *in order to envision by way of a position of suffering*. And it is precisely because the stories of Melanie and Lucy are elided in *Disgrace* that the responsibility for such an aporetic imagining, with all its troubling snares, is left with the reader.

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